



OSHERA

VII

Keiso

ILLUSTRATION BY

Kureta

Frozen Finale



“No need to fear. My name is Acromdo the Variety. I’ve come to help you.”

ACROMDO THE VARIETY

One of the self-proclaimed demon kings cooperating with Iriolde the Atypical Tome. He utilizes a bizarre attack, sending his own severed arm flying, but what is its true value...?

KIA THE WORLD WORD

Young elf girl. Releases all-powerful Word Arts, capable of altering the weather or terrain with a single word.



No matter how long I wait, nothing ever changes...

This wasn't the first time. Not the first betrayal, nor the first disappointment.

Like pure white permafrost, Lucinoca's world remained completely unchanged.

Still, she always wanted to believe...

...that there was someone, somewhere, with the courage to challenge winter.

She wanted to believe it was still possible for the strongest to taste defeat.

LUCINOCA THE WINTER

The strongest of all dragons, once doubted to even exist. A champion-claying legend.

"If we keep flying, it'll be impossible to get perfectly over her head. I can't drop you down easily."


"No need. I'll adjust."

SINDIKAR THE ARK

A self-proclaimed demon king cooperating with Iridde. An elderly zmeu who excels in Force Arts and yearns to master the skies.

PSIANOP THE INEXHAUSTIBLE STAGNATION


An ingenious ooze supremely skilled in various martial arts. When the legendary First Party embarked on their quest to challenge the True Demon King, they left him behind.



“Want me to make a second one, just for you, Kuuro?”

VIGA THE CLAMOR

A self-proclaimed demon king tasked with providing Rosclay support with Word Arts while secretly cooperating with Iriolde.



“I-it’s just, just sooo beauuutiful! A whole world is here! My fungi are marvelous!”

YUKIS THE GROUND COLONY

Self-proclaimed demon king cooperating with Iriolde.
A Life Arts caster capable of producing an army all by himself.

ISHURA

VII

Frozen Finale

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ISHURA VII

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Translation by David Musto

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ISHURA Vol. 7 KETTOSHUKYOKUTEN

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First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: July 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Payton Campbell

Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Keiso (Manga author), author. | Kureta, illustrator. | Musto, David, translator.

Title: Ishura / Keiso ; illustration by Kureta ; translation by David Musto.

Other titles: Ishura. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2022.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021062849 | ISBN 9781975337865 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975337889 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975337902 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975337926 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975363079 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975369446 (v. 6 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975376697 (v. 7 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PL872.5.E57 I7413 2022 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23/eng/20220121

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021062849>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-7669-7 (trade paperback)

978-1-9753-7670-3 (ebook)

E3-20240627-JV-NF-ORI

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

STORY SO FAR

The identity of the one who defeated the True Demon King—the ultimate threat who gripped the world in terror—is shrouded in mystery.

Little is known about this hero.

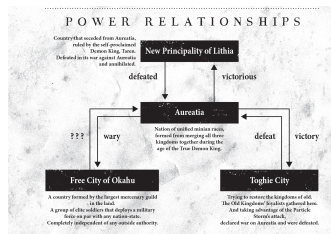
The terror of the True Demon King abruptly came to an end.

Nevertheless, the champions born from the era of the Demon King still remain in this world.

Now, with the enemy of all life brought low, these champions, wielding enough power to transform the world, have begun to do as they please, their untamed wills threatening a new era of war and strife.

To Aureatia, now the sole kingdom unifying the minian races, the existence of these champions has become a threat. No longer champions, they are now demons bringing ruin to all—the shura. To ensure peace in the new era, it is necessary to eliminate any threat to the world's future, and designate the True Hero to guide and protect the hopes of the people.

Thus, the Twenty-Nine Officials, the governing administrators of Aureatia, have gathered these shura and their miraculous abilities from across the land, regardless of race, and organized an imperial competition to crown the True Hero once and for all.





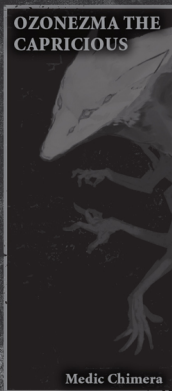
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HAADE THE FLASHPOINT



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YUCA THE HALATION GAOL



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NOFELT THE SOMBER WIND



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DANT THE HEATH FURROW



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HYAKKA THE HEAT HAZE



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CAYON THE THUNDERING

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HARGHENT THE STILL



Silencer Dragon

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HIDOW THE CLAMP



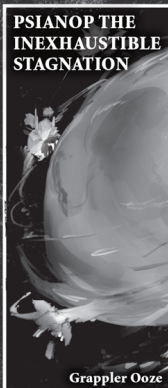
Rogue Wyvern

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PIERCING PLUMESHADE



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QWELL THE WAX
FLOWER



Grappler Ooze



SIXWAYS EXHIBITION



Clown Zmeu

Sponsor
ENU THE DISTANT
MIRROR



Creator/Architect
Golem/Homunculus

Sponsor
KAETE THE ROUND
TABLE



Juggernaut

Sponsor
FLINSUDA THE
PORTENT



Paladin Minia

Sponsor
NÓPHOK THE
CREPUSCULE BELL

GLOSSARY

❖ Word Arts

- ① Laws of the world that permit and establish phenomena and living creatures that physically shouldn't be able to exist, such as the construction of a giant's body.
- ② Phenomenon that conveys the intentions of a speaker's words to the listener, regardless of the speaker's race or language.
- ③ Or the generic term for arts that utilize this phenomenon to distort natural phenomena via "requests" to a certain target.

Something much like what would be called magic. Force, Thermal, Craft, and Life Arts compose the four core groups, but there are some who can use arts outside of these four groups. While necessary to be familiarized with the target in order to utilize these arts, powerful Word Arts users are able to offset this requirement.

❖ Force Arts

Arts that inflict directed power and speed, what is known as momentum, on a target.

❖ Craft Arts

Arts that change a target's shape.

❖ Thermal Arts

Arts that inflict undirected energy, such as heat, electrical current, and light, on a target.

❖ Life Arts

Arts that change a target's nature.

❖ Visitors

Those who possess abilities that deviate greatly from all common knowledge, and thus were transported to this world from another one known as the Beyond. Visitors are unable to use Word Arts.

❖ Enchanted Sword • Magic Items

Swords and tools that possess potent abilities. Similar to visitors, due to their mighty power, there are some objects that were transported here from another world.

❖ Aureatia Twenty-Nine Officials

The highest functionaries who govern Aureatia. Ministers are civil servants, while Generals are military officers.

There is no hierarchy-based seniority or rank among the Twenty-Nine Officials.

❖ Self-Proclaimed Demon King

A generic term for "demonic monarch" not related to the One True King among the three kingdoms. There are some cases where even those who do not proclaim themselves as a monarch, but who wield great power to threaten Aureatia, are acknowledged as self-proclaimed demon kings by Aureatia and targeted for subjugation.

❖ Sixways Exhibition

A tournament to determine the True Hero. The person who wins each one-on-one match and advances all the way through to the end will be named the True Hero. Backing from a member of the Twenty-Nine Officials is required to enter the competition.

C O N T E N T S

⌘ *TENTH VERSE:* **SIXWAYS EXHIBITION IV** ⌘

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AUREATIA TWENTY-NINE OFFICIALS

First Minister GRASSE THE FOUNDATION MAP

A man nearing old age. Tasked with being the chairperson who presides over Twenty-Nine Officials' meetings. Not belonging to any of the factions in the Sixways Exhibition and maintaining neutrality.

Second General ROSCLAY THE ABSOLUTE

A man who garners absolute trust as a champion. Participates in the Sixways Exhibition, supporting himself. The leader of the largest faction within the Twenty-Nine Officials.

Third Minister JELKY THE SWIFT INK

A bespectacled man with the air of a shrewd bureaucrat. Planned the Sixways Exhibition. Belongs to Rosclay's faction.

Fourth Minister KAETE THE ROUND TABLE

Sponsoring Mestelxil the Box of Desperate Knowledge. Kiyazuna the Axle's former pupil. Now a wanted man in Aureatia, he is on the lam.

Fifth Official VACANT SEAT

Previously the seat of Iriolde the Atypical Tome, a crafty mastermind that boasted enormous influence in Aureatia's financial world. He was expelled from his seat, and it remains empty.

Sixth General HARGHENT THE STILL

A man who yearns for authority despite being ridiculed for incompetence. Not part of any faction. Killed his old friend-turned-self-proclaimed demon king, Alus. Sponsoring Lucnoca the Winter. Had a deep connection with Alus the Star Runner.

Seventh Minister FLINSUDA THE PORTENT

Corpulent woman adorned in gold and silver accessories. Leads the medical division. A pragmatist who only believes in the power of money. Sponsoring Tu the Magic.

Eighth Minister SHEANEK THE WORD INTERMEDIARY

A man who can decipher and give accounts in a variety of different scripts. Acts in practice as First Minister Grasse the Foundation Map's Secretary. Maintains neutrality just like Grasse.

Ninth General YANIEGIZ THE CHISEL

A sinewy man with a snaggletooth. Belongs to Rosclay's Faction.

Tenth General QWELL THE WAX FLOWER

A woman with long bangs that hide her eyes. Sponsor for Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation. Timid and always trembling in fright. For some unknown reason, even compared to the rest of the Twenty-Nine Officials, she possesses superlative physical strength.

Eleventh Minister NOPHTOK THE CREPUSCULE BELL

An elderly man with a gentle demeanor. Sponsor for Kuze the Passing Disaster. Head of the Order Division. Currently wanted by the Free City of Okafu.

Twelfth General SABFOM THE WHITE WEAVE

A man who covers his face with an iron mask. Previously crossed swords with self-proclaimed demon king Morio and is currently recuperating.

Thirteenth Minister ENU THE DISTANT MIRROR

An aristocratic man with slicked-back hair. Sponsor for Zeljirga the Abyss Web. Linaris the Obsidian's pawn, but he is betraying Aureatia not as a corpse, but of his own volition.

Fourteenth General YUCA THE HALATION GAOL

A simple and honest man, round and plump. Doesn't have a shred of ambition. Head of Aureatia's Public Safety branch. Sponsoring Ozonezma the Capricious.

**Fifteenth General
HAIZESTA THE
GATHERING SPOT**

A man in the prime of his life with a cynical smile. Possessed monstrous muscular strength. Secretly part of Kaete's faction, but was manipulated by Obsidian Eyes and killed.

**Sixteenth General
NOFELT THE SOMBER
WIND**

An abnormally tall man. Sponsor for Uhak the Silent. Originated from the same Order almshouse as Kuze. Killed by Kuze and Nastique.

**Seventeenth Minister
ELEA THE RED TAG**

A beautiful, young woman who walks a different path from her ancestral trade of sex work. Supervised Aureatia's intelligence apparatus. Put to the sword for her acts of foul play during the Sixways Exhibition.

**Eighteenth Minister
QUEWAI THE MOON
FRAGMENT**

A young, gloomy man with outstanding computational abilities. Belongs to Haade's faction.

**Nineteenth Minister
HYAKKA THE HEAT
HAZE**

A small-statured man who supervises the agricultural division. Straining himself to become worthy of his position in the Twenty-Nine Officials. Sponsoring Shalk the Sound Slicer.

**Twentieth Minister
HIDOW THE CLAMP**

A haughty son of a noble family and at the same time a popular, quick-witted man. Sponsor for Alus the Star Runner. Sponsoring Alus to ensure he doesn't win.

**Twenty-First General
TUTURI THE BLUE
VIOLET FOAM**

A woman with ruffled hair tied behind her head. She belongs to Haade's faction.

**Twenty-Second General
MIZIAL THE
IRON-PIERCING
PLUMESHAD**

A boy who became a member of the Twenty-Nine Officials at just sixteen years old. Possesses a self-assured temperament. Sponsoring Toroa the Awful.

**Twenty-Third Official
VACANT SEAT**

Previously the seat of Taren the Punished, a battle-hardened and fierce woman who led the New Principality of Lithia in seceding from Aureatia. However, it is currently empty following her secession and defection.

**Twenty-Fourth General
DANT THE HEATH
FURROW**

An exceedingly serious man. Commands the northern front army, containing Old Kingdoms' loyalists' forces. Part of the Queen's faction—and harbors ill feelings toward Rosclay's faction. Sponsoring Zigita Zogi the Thousandth.

**Twenty-Fifth General
CAYON THE
THUNDERING**

A one-armed man with a feminine speaking manner. Sponsor for Mele the Horizon's Roar.

**Twenty-Sixth Minister
MEEKA THE
WHISPERED**

A stern woman who gives a rigid and rectangular impression. Acting as the adjudicator of the Sixways Exhibition.

**Twenty-Seventh General
HAADE THE
FLASHPOINT**

A man who sincerely loves war. Sponsor for Soujirou the Willow-Sword. Prominent figure accompanied by the largest military faction. Regarded as the largest rival to Rosclay's faction.

**Twenty-Eighth Minister
ANTEL THE
ALIGNMENT**

A tan man wearing dark glasses. Belongs to Rosclay's faction.

**Twenty-Ninth Official
VACANT SEAT**

ISHURA

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ILLUSTRATION BY Kureta

Tenth Verse:

**SIXWAYS
EXHIBITION IV**

Twenty years ago, the seven strongest warriors of the age, the First Party, challenged the Demon King and were mercilessly routed.

When the final embers of hope were extinguished, the True Demon King's reign of terror began at last.

This was also the period when a group of lycans, just over ten in number, gathered in the Gokashae Sand Sea and began establishing a new settlement far from minian civilization.

This irregular group of lycans resembled a martial arts school more than a lawless band of renegades. They were a fighting collective known as the Zehf Tribe: monks who revered one of the members of the First Party, Neft the Nirvana.

Few knew the goals of these terrifying monks. Even fewer knew that, when this group formed, there was a single undersized ooze mixed in among the lycans.

In the settlement at that time was nothing but a small shrine—yet to expand into a proper temple—and a well for drawing water.

In the center of the small shrine, sitting cross-legged in meditation without moving whatsoever, was an elderly lycan.

Another lycan was attending to him. This lycan had been the teacher leading the Zehf Tribe. However...

“These are all of the events that occurred in your absence, milord.”

The withered lycan, Neft the Nirvana, was the founder of their school.

Among the First Party, where all the others had met their deaths or otherwise suffered tremendously, Nirvana, second of his name, had, in a cruel twist of fate, returned alive.

The defeat of the immortal warrior Neft shocked all of his disciples and flung them into despair. But even then, Neft gave them the strict orders to continue their training exactly the same as before.

He remained in his meditative position ever since he had returned to the Zehf tribe two days prior. So great were the fruits of his training that he remained so still as to appear dead. If a

sandstorm kicked up or a bug landed on him, there wasn't the slightest tremble; not even a breath escaped his lungs.

His expression alone smiled with delight.

"That fledgling...? He went off into the middle of the desert and reached the Sand Labyrinth?"

"...It would take nothing short of a miracle for him to survive," the attending teacher replied. "It was our mistake for thinking that he was following after you, milord, and heading outside the Sand Sea... It was the day after we received the report that the First Party had failed to bring the Demon King down. Psianop slipped out of the eastern gate and made for the heart of the Sand Sea...and when we discovered him at the Sand Labyrinth, since he crossed the desert with his ooze body, the heat and dryness left him more dead than alive. He likely would not have survived the trip back if we tried to bring him, so we gave him food and water and left him behind."

"He volunteered to stay behind, didn't he?"

"...Yes."

"Then there's nothing left to say. If you are still bringing him food, then let the next time be the last. It was never something worth cutting into your training time to begin with."

"But, milord... You yourself told us to keep Psianop alive."

"Enough."

Among the First Party, the legendary seven who challenged the True Demon Lord, there was an unknown eighth member. An ooze by the name of Psianop.

He had no physical strength to speak of. He was clever and had an impressive command of language for an ooze. That was all there was to their companion.

This Psianop interacted a lot with the other seven members, spoke often, and diligently strove to handle the work he could manage.

Neft believed that the First Party—a gathering of a relatively normal young man, a heretical young girl, an idolized sage, a man-eating monster, a visitor from another world, and even a former Demon King—managed to reach the final battle without dissolving along the way thanks to their individual efforts. Fralik the Heaven was their mental support pillar, and Psianop acted as a buffer to mediate between them.

The other six members likely shared the same feelings on the

matter. When it came time for their decisive battle against the Demon King, with no guarantee of survival, all of them had agreed to remove Psianop from the party. His lack of combat ability left them no choice.

Although he was practically harmless, he was beastfolk. The Zehf Tribe that Neft led decided to take the ooze into their care to ensure Psianop didn't follow after his beloved companions. To prevent Psianop from ever challenging the True Demon King, even if the First Party were to be defeated.

"For a fragile ooze like Psianop...*groo-groo*...to reach the Sand Labyrinth without exhausting all his strength... It surely cannot be mere coincidence."

"...If he didn't go down the shortest route... If he became the slightest bit lost, or if he had failed to properly read our maps, he would have perished without a doubt."

"Those who expect to lay down their lives from the beginning cannot summon such resolve," Neft quietly, yet assertively declared. "Can you really coddle someone with such determination? Make him procure his food through his own strength. If he chooses to live in solitude, then leave him to it..."

Neft had thought that, should Psianop desire fighting strength of his own, it would be fine to train him here in the Zehf Tribe. However, the ooze had chosen a completely different path for himself without Neft guiding him at all.

The Sand Labyrinth stored a tremendous treasure trove of knowledge that the lycans had simply been unable to decipher. If, perhaps, there was some form of devoted study, only capable inside this perverse "library" that flowed here from the Beyond...

"We will focus on our own training. What is the height that our Zehf tribe is meant to aim for?"

"...Understood. We must surpass our lord's heights with our own skills... And then, at the next opportunity, we will slay the True Demon King ourselves."

"Very good."

Neft the Nirvana had been bested. However, the lycan who followed Neft from before his fight with the Demon King even now maintained their will to keep on fighting. They hadn't been broken by fear like their leader.

Someone who inherited the essence of Neft's technique would, one day, kill the True Demon King. It could take decades, centuries,

or even millennia. It may happen once the Kingdoms were annihilated, and the minian races were erased from this continent. Perhaps those who continued to inherit this will would come to an end first.

Nevertheless. Someday, someone would.

After the First Party's defeat, if there was any leftover hope, this was all it amounted to.

"I will wait for one to surpass me."

The True Demon King had undoubtedly killed the nearly immortal Neft. Neft had completely stopped any and all movement after his return because, at this point, *he had no choice but to do so*. He only had enough vitality left to spend over ten years gathering the vestiges of his life force, like individual grains of sand, to truly fight at full power one more time.

After a long period of time, the successor of the First Party would appear to challenge the Demon King. When that time came, Neft planned to fight just once more to prove this successor's all-powerful strength and complete the succession.

Since he hadn't been able to beat the True Demon King, Neft bore the responsibility of raising someone stronger than himself. In so doing, he would fulfill the purpose of his birth.

The lycan would congregate even further and spend time growing stronger. The Zehf tribe was a martial arts school established for this purpose.

"...Milord. There is one thing...that Psianop said."

"Tell me."

"He said he would grow stronger until, someday, he can reach where you are, milord."

"*Groo, groo...*"

Still sitting cross-legged, Neft's lips didn't tremble whatsoever. Still, he laughed from the heart with nothing more than his expression.

Neft could readily believe that Psianop would do *something* someday.

Since he was, unmistakably, a member of the First Party.

"The fledgling... At least say you'll *surpass* me."



The library, half buried in sand, possessed an architectural style unlike anything found in this world—unlike anything Psianop had laid on eyes during his travels with the First Party.

The building itself had been expelled from the Beyond—an exceptional event even when taking visitors and magic tools into consideration.

Nevertheless, when Psianop first arrived, it may have been far more important to him that there was simply some kind of structure to shield him from the sun and the wind.

The room full of bookshelves was separated by a heavy door without any windows to let the sun in, and thus, it appeared to be somewhere even a beast could live without fear in the desert.

Fortunately, it was the rainy season, and a river flowed through a craggy outcrop not too far from the library. For the time being, he would be able to stockpile just enough water to live here. As for food, he would have to identify, one by one, which of the flora and bugs found in the area were edible.

...I can only ever do one thing at a time.

Was there so much value in leaving the lycan tribe and fending for himself in the middle of the desert?

Psianop still didn't understand this much, himself.

However, he believed an ooze had no place among Neft's disciples.

They were lycan and he was an ooze. Assuming he could master Neft the Nirvana's techniques, they were all developed in line with a lycan's physique and ability. It would be impossible for Psianop to become stronger than Neft.

Thus, Psianop needed to train his mind rather than his body.

Though I can't understand the writing used in the Beyond, I can comprehend most everything else...

During Psianop's travels with the First Party, Romzo the Star Map taught him how to read the Order's script. This knowledge had taken root in Psianop over the course of their journey together, and even became a point of pride for him. He had become able to do something that no other ooze could.

I'll take things one step at a time.

He began to copy the shapes of the characters he was seeing for the first time and slowly built a vast lexicon. He gathered together all the books with many annotations and surveyed them to see if there was anything in common between the characters that

indicated a certain object. There were also occasions when he would realize that something he thought was a written character actually wasn't. In time, he also came to realize that there was utterly meaningless vocabulary, or words that outlined concepts that didn't exist in this world at all.

Romzo the Star Map wasn't here now. There was no one else who would serve as an ooze's teacher.

Psianop could only handle the daunting deciphering work by going one step at a time.

Still, no matter what, I can always manage at least one thing.

As long as Psianop continued to struggle with the work, his efforts weren't zero.

During the periods there was water, he would tirelessly carry it for his stockpile. He needed to immediately flee from any starving beasts he encountered, or when he felt the rumblings of a worm slithering through the earth, to ensure he didn't need to search for food every day.

However, he would devote all remaining time to the texts.

It took Psianop two years to decrypt a single volume of a tome from the Beyond known as a "dictionary."

What he valued most wasn't the knowledge he gained from the dictionary, but the lessons learned from the experience.

I needed a way to fight for myself.

For the two years he dedicated to deciphering, Psianop had faced innumerable threats to his life.

While, certainly, Psianop had found his way through these crises with his own intelligence and quick wit, he also understood that most of the time it was the result of nothing but good fortune.

In order to measure up to the First Party, he would need to spend a far greater amount of time learning.

Across such an enormous stretch of time, would he continue to avoid all the crises he encountered through sheer luck, just as he had over the past two years? That was sure to be impossible.

In order to survive for long in this desert, he needed a means to fight more than anything else.

If I had remained in the settlement...

His stifled regrets threatened to bubble over.

If I had inherited Neft's technique, even if it didn't suit my body...

Was he supposed to go back to the Zehf tribe and restart his training from the beginning? Or was he supposed to use the

dictionary he had managed to decipher as a key and carry out his will to master the library's endless knowledge?

In any case, it didn't appear that he would be able to do both at once.

All Psianop could ever do was one thing at a time.

...I'll continue to learn. There has to be some fighting wisdom here somewhere.

This was the first major crossroad during Psianop's journey.



Focusing his strength, he condensed and contorted his gelatinous frame.

They were contradictory body movements for an ooze like Psianop; however, in order to replicate minian techniques, he needed to practice moving his body in such a way. In repetition as well.

He murmured the name of the move, "Straight jab."

The technique possessed enough bite to send a small fragment of debris flying a fair distance.

It wouldn't prove useful in combat. Even Izick and Lumelly had been able to deliver more powerful strikes. Nevertheless, he was now able to fight off poisonous insects. The shifting of his body necessary to replicate the punch's opening step could provide some amount of utility when he needed to fly over rocky areas.

"This is fine. I'm getting stronger."

At some point, Psianop had begun to vocalize his thoughts.

The initial catalyst behind joining the First Party had been because, unlike other oozes, Psianop was gifted with speech. If he wasn't able to speak, he would have never even made it to the starting line in his quest for self-improvement.

"Next is the front kick."

Amongst the innumerable books in the library, there were writings chronicling the martial arts of the Beyond.

They were all outlined by assuming a minian body and, exactly like the techniques of the Zehf tribe, very far from being the optimal techniques for Psianop.

I still haven't found a different path from Neft's. Even now...

He continued to hone himself in order to gain the barest

strength needed to survive, even if it was an awkward imitation of another race's techniques.

As he did this, he continued to voraciously decrypt and devour the knowledge of the library's tomes—however.

It was around this time when an unknown danger began to haunt his work.

There were times when approaching a specific section of writing would cause him to grow dizzy, and he would awake to find that the sun had already set. Touching a particular page of a book would cause a sharp pain to shoot through his body. Even though there wasn't enough space for a living creature besides him to enter the archive, he discovered a volume swarmed by an unusually large number of bugs.

Psianop's physical and mental fortitude were slowly being eaten away.

The library, expelled from the Beyond, was a collection of material and immaterial oddities.

His attempts to decipher and understand the documents within its walls were equivalent to ingesting an unknown poison along with every bit of knowledge he gained.

One book inflicted a gnawing hunger. Another book tried to devour anyone who attempted to decrypt it. Yet another book forced a druglike dependency on the reader. Another book whispered in an unknown person's voice.

“...Is this all meaningless?”

Buried in reading material, Psianop finally vocalized the fear that he had dared not speak.

It was a day so hot the entire world seemed to boil.

“No matter what I do...”

Five years had passed. Continuing his solitary training, Psianop had grown able to overcome any danger with his experience and knowledge, just as well as any wild animal.

The will to survive. The strength to manipulate the outcome of a fight. The intelligence to keep learning. The power to hone it all even further.

All of this strength, when held up against the abnormalities of the library that tormented Psianop, had been meaningless.

The more he trained, the more he seemed to awaken to its true, colossal power.

Was he simply being toyed with by something so tremendous

that no living creature with a soul, be it Psianop, the First Party, or even the True Demon King, could stand against it?

The fact that Psianop was still alive must have been because he was *fortunate* enough not to read a book that had a more lethal effect.

Fortunately, he was born relatively clever for an ooze; *fortunately*, he was sent away and spared from the decisive battle with the True Demon King; *fortunately*, he had arrived at the library without shriveling away in the desert...and this sort of fortune would eventually end, like a taut string being cut. Psianop would perish somewhere along the way.

It was a fear he had no way to fight against, exactly like the moment he realized his lack of martial ability.

...I should put an end to this. Someone like me could build up as much knowledge as possible and still not have any hope of beating the True Demon King. Even if I can't defeat them—

However, the train of thought ended mostly on reflex.

Psianop kicked off the floor, jumping, while simultaneously sending a punch flying toward the blind spot of a bookcase.

Some being other than him had been there—the presence of a sinister something, with a mind of its own.

“.....”

His fist connected with nothing but empty air.

The gaze of someone, the sound of someone's footsteps, and the smell of someone else, produced by the library's books, all came to form an image, making him feel as if there was actually someone standing there.

Yet Psianop's senses, and his fist, had seemed to clearly perceive the formless presence of something.

“I'm...improving...”

It was a thunderous realization.

Previously, when he had been traveling with First Party, he never could have imagined fighting anyone. He had concluded that it would have been impossible to perceive and defeat a formless enemy unless he was someone like Neft or Romzo.

Perhaps, though, Psianop could accomplish it, too.

“Of course... If I'm going to be cursed by these books, then I just need to *be cursed even more*. How could I possibly defeat the Demon King if I can't bring down a library or two...? I won't rest. Do it all, one at a time.”

From that moment, a single goal was born within Psianop's daily life.

To perceive this shadow, shaped by the library's curse, and overcome it.

When he would continue his book deciphering, when he would go out into the desert to gather food, and even when he would eat or lay dormant, he would constantly keep a part of consciousness keenly at work.

When he did, he was able to understand that he wasn't alone in the vast library he'd initially considered deserted. A chaotic entity, a bit like malice, a bit like insanity. He challenged it to a fight.

This shadow didn't have a corporeal form, would quickly vanish, and was impossible to even see with his eyes, but Psianop thought that by continuing his unorthodox training, he might eventually be able to strike it.

This situation continued for close to a year and, at some point, this shadow began to show Psianop something that resembled a reaction of its own. This didn't mean that the figure had gained the ability to speak or that it had become possible for them to communicate with each other.

When Psianop attacked it, it reacted with something resembling a *counterattack*.

To say that an opponent without a physical form would perform a counterattack was beyond comprehension. It was more accurate to say it was because these elements reached the realm of perception that Psianop had become able to comprehend when the shadow was matching him with its counterattack.

If the shadow was like an incarnation of the accumulated curses and knowledge amassed within this library, then it would be able to respond to the martial arts of the Beyond. For Psianop, this formless figure was a product of his image training, but it may have also served as his silent mentor.

His long period of solitary life inside the Sand Labyrinth served to hone Psianop's instincts far more than the asceticism of the monks. The martial arts of the Beyond that he learned solely by practicing the movements depicted in the books he had deciphered were sublimated, through countless drills and practice, into techniques of his own. The body that had constantly weathered the preposterous curses and knowledge had begun to evolve into a life-form that couldn't be contained within the scope of a singular ooze

body.

Time continued to pass. Ten years. Fifteen years.

Psianop continued to battle the shadow. The shadow would occasionally change its size and shape; other times, it would endlessly multiply and even utilize techniques Psianop didn't know of. The incorporeal fists never managed to scar Psianop—however, he felt the reality of death every time he lost a fight, and the shadow touched him.

The fear that his training would end halfway through was constantly present in his mind.

Why did Neft the Nirvana, already excelling with unparalleled martial skill, also master a secret art to control his life force?

I understand the true nature of this fear... I need to conquer it.

From this period, he began to hone his self-regenerative Life Arts. This knowledge was one thing that couldn't be found recorded in the words from the Beyond, so all he could rely on were his memories of Neft and studying on his own. Nevertheless, he always had a target to test his Word Arts on in the most immediate place of all.

“More. I'm going to become even stronger, Neft. All of you... The strength of the First Party had to have been *much greater than this*.”

His realization had been mistaken.

There were not so many truly colossal powers that he couldn't conquer.

If he honed all of his senses to the extreme, he was able to move like normal even when amidst the nightmares and illusions that the books would show him. If he had perfect command of his own body, even a mere ooze like himself would be able to take down a wyrm. If he continued to fight, train, and push himself, he would eventually surpass even the First Party and defeat the True Demon King. Until that day came, Psianop's fight would never end.



Twenty-one years went by with Psianop holed up in the Sand Labyrinth.

The True Demon King died. The royal games to clearly determine who slew this Demon King were going to be held in the

largest city in the world, Aureatia. It had yet to be given the name Sixways Exhibition.

These royal games, unprecedented in the Kingdom's history, were ostensibly recruiting self-proclaimed heroes regardless of their race or status—however, a great number of well-known champions and visitors were already being backed by the Twenty-Nine Officials. There were very few nameless participants who possessed the strength to surpass these famous champions and obtain the qualifications to participate.

Therefore, the soldiers in charge of screening participants didn't even recognize Psianop, who was visiting the castle garden theater as an applicant looking to participate.

"Captain. Look at this ooze here. I've never seen one that can talk as well as this guy." A young male soldier curiously called to a female soldier.

"An ooze, huh...? You'd see them all over the waterfront in my hometown, since the species usually gather in groups and all. It was pretty cool once evening came to see them all fill up with the color of the setting sun."

In Aureatia, oozes didn't have citizenship, but they weren't aggressively stamped out either, since they were harmless.

"...Do I need to explain myself again?" Psianop murmured, aggravated.

This whole conversation had already come up three times that day alone, and twice they hadn't reached very appropriate conclusions.

"I'm a grappler, one who defeated Neft the Nirvana from the First Party. I've received evidence to prove as much from three witnesses. I'd like recognition as a candidate in the royal games."

When he was departing the Zehf tribe, Psianop was given a fragment of Neft the Nirvana's twin axes to take with him.

As long as he had certain physical proof, he had thought that no matter what Psianop's appearance and race may be, the minian races would be forced to recognize him, but...

"...Hey, Captain. I was thinking... Is this job even necessary? All we deal with are hopeless losers, right? I'm sure the bigwigs are the ones who'll decide who's going to play the foil to the Hero anyway."

"A job's a job. Don't let your guard down. Sure, all we get are insolent and vulgar louts, but we don't get the chance to beat the

snot out of those types in our normal line of work. It's not so bad."

"*Hah*, I get it now! I heard that guy you smacked around yesterday's going to be in the hospital a long time. How dare he look down on you just because you're a woman, I swe—"

"Hurry up and evaluate me. Or is listening to all of your drivel one of the requirements?"

"*Huh?*"

The male soldier looked a bit annoyed. Perhaps he thought that since no one else was looking to be evaluated aside from this ooze—who was clearly out of the question—he could take a bit of a break.

"Hey, ooze. You crazy or something? Lemme show you what we do to guys like y—"

The soldier tried to kick Neft's ax, which was left on the table.

His kick stopped.

"You're lucky."

Psianop was touching the calf of the soldier's pivoting foot.

The soldier didn't even know at what point in the kicking motion, faster than a single breath, Psianop had slipped close to him.

However, just by touching his leg, Psianop ensured the soldier was no longer able to move his kicking foot any further. Still standing in his unstable position on one foot, he was unable to pull his body back in nor collapse to the ground.

"If you had kicked Neft's ax, your spine would've shattered."

"*Augh, gahak, koff...?!*"

The soldier's agonized groans didn't stem from Psianop, stimulating a pain point at his feet.

It was because he had been forced to maintain his stance, midway through launching his kick, purely off the strength of his own muscles. Simply by standing, his own bodily strength was tormenting his skeleton and nerves.

"What're you doing...?!"

When the female soldier next to him went to draw her sword, an open hand flew in and stopped her.

The blow came from the male soldier.

The male soldier, locked into the stance by the ooze, for that one moment, contorted his body on reflex, as if writhing in agony, and was forced to accurately hit the female soldier's hand with the back of his own.

"I don't mind if you draw your sword, but... Why now and not during the evaluation? The public advertisement for the royal games claimed that there would be no discrimination based on status or race."

"C-Captain, I-I'm not...the one doing this!"

"I've already come here no less than three times, and I believe the requirements haven't changed at all, have they?"

The soldier didn't move from his ridiculous pose, standing on one leg with his left arm widely stretched out.

Due to the male soldier's left hand obstructing the hilt, the female soldier remained unable to draw her sword.

"Ooze... Are you the one doing this?"

"Who else could it be? I'm putting on a show of my technique for you."

Just by separating himself from the male soldier's legs, the soldier's center of gravity crumbled, and he fell over headfirst.

"*Gwaugh?!"*

"...In that case, a direct taste would serve as good experience, yes? You, woman. Do you want to have a go?"

".....!"

"You're not going to fight, but don't intend to add me to the roster, either, huh?"

Psianop picked up Neft's ax. The battle amongst the First Party members, both combatants putting absolutely everything on the line, didn't serve as proof of anything in this country.

"....."

"I'll come again tomorrow. I've waited twenty-one years. One more day is nothing."

"U-um." The voice of a third party interjected from behind Psianop.

Although it was so quiet, it was almost impossible to recognize that it was butting in at all. It was a woman's voice, like a bug modestly buzzing in the background of a conversation.

The woman, her thick bangs hiding her face, had arrived in front of the garden theater.

She had an awfully fragile demeanor, lacking any confidence whatsoever. She didn't even carry a weapon.

"Um... Mr. Ooze there. Just now, you said... 'you, woman'... didn't you?"

"That's right."

“...Were you, perhaps, referring to me? I-I’m...a woman, too.”

“.....”

Psianop could tell that she was saying this to cover for the female soldier who had fled from the ooze’s challenge.

Psianop responded, “Yeah. You’re right on the mark. I want to fight you.”

She had simply been passing by to observe the hero candidates applying from the general public.

Nevertheless, it was not a coincidence that she ran into Psianop.

Whether it was Aureatia, the world controlled by the minian races...or anywhere else, even the first Kingdom he had been to in twenty-one years, he had come all this way believing that someone like her was bound to be there.

Her name was Qwell the Wax Flower, Aureatia’s Tenth General.



The nighttime plaza, after the first match of the Sixway Exhibition had concluded.

Participating as a hero candidate, Psianop had defeated Toroa the Awful.

Even that night, hours after he had half his body cleaved off and used Life Arts to fully regenerate, he didn’t neglect his training. Rather, in order to imprint the experiences from the battle that day into his memory, he was putting together a training regimen.

His sponsor, Qwell, stood about five paces away from Psianop.

The wind was gentle, and the night air was crisp and clear.

Even this late into the night, the town lamps—lined up a set distance apart along the road in front of the plaza—and several windows in Aureatian buildings were still giving off light.

The quiet, however, was the same as any other city. The crunching sound of stepping on grass, lost amidst the normal hustle and bustle, could be heard clearly.

Most of these resounded each time Qwell would swing her massive war ax. Despite swinging the weapon—so heavy even a grown man could barely lift it—with almost monstrous speed, her footsteps were exceedingly quiet.

Psianop, the one taking on these ax swings, was even quieter. He only made a few movements to begin with.

A vertical slash. Tracing a large circle, the ax blade closed in diagonally behind Psianop. The blade passed through, but the seemingly immobile Psianop evaded it by a hair's breadth.

The heavy war ax's momentum continued its circular arc and scraped the ground. Its wielder, Qwell, dropped her body slightly, and the motion undulated greatly, this time shifting to a sideways sweep. An abruptly transforming, lightning-fast slash.

Even this attack was undermined by Psianop's retreat two fingerbreadths backward. Without even repelling the war ax straight on, he continued to fend off the attacks with movements that were, from a minian perspective, shorter than a single step.

His opponent, Qwell, didn't stop her offensive, either. She began to shift to her next attack immediately, to avoid having her weapon grabbed and to deny her opponent any opening to get closer.

The clashes back and forth, where a single mistaken move spelled death, was performed as naturally as breathing.

As a result of their repeated training together, both fighters had become familiar with the other's technique.

"H-how...how is it, Psianop?"

"...Not bad. Another two or three days of practice at this level and I should be back in full form."

These were the heaviest wounds he had suffered since his previous battle with Neft the Nirvana, but considering that he was recovering from getting hit with Toroa the Awful's enchanted swords—dipping below the line between life and death—the recovery time was too short, if anything.

The marvelous speed of his regeneration also meant that he was paying the suitable cost—five years of his cellular life span—each time he regenerated. The regenerative Life Arts would chip away at Psianop's remaining time with each use.

"How are you doing?"

"W-well... I don't think... I'm managing to do...everything you've taught me." Qwell bashfully smiled, wiping her sweat. "But whenever I'm sparring with you, Psianop, I feel like I can do it."

"If you have a model to follow, the techniques will come to you."

Psianop fought against the shadow that appeared when he was halfway insane, and spent twenty-one years mastering his technique.

Whether the techniques of the living, the knowledge from books...or even an illusion—when one first stepped down a path and began something, they needed a model that would show them their destination.

“...Toroa the Awful was young. He must’ve had a good example to follow.”

So slowly that even Qwell’s eyes could capture the movement, his pseudopod extended and released a straight jab.

Slightly holding back, Qwell used the middle of her war ax hilt to block just before the conventional attack could hit her. There was still this much of a gap in the speed of their opening movement.

Her ability to concentrate on offense was impressive, but she might still have some weaknesses in her guard.

“U-Um... In that case...why’re you acting as a model for someone like me?”

“Even I have something to gain from it. That, and I can’t think of anything else I want to do before I perish.”

“...Do you plan...on dying in the Sixways Exhibition?”

“...”

Once during his battle with Neft. Once during his match with Toroa. If he were to then use his full regeneration Life Arts during each of his remaining three matches, then Psianop’s life wouldn’t hold out another two years.

At the summit of the Sixways Exhibition, when he proved he was the strongest among the First Party, Psianop’s journey would come to an end as well.

“I-is there anything I could do?”

“No. This problem stems from my way of life.”

“...Erm. Um! Psianop!”

Her battle ax halted in place.

Qwell seemed to be forcing her words out by any means necessary. She was so unaccustomed to talking that it was enough to completely pause her training movements.

“...I...can understand how you feel. I—I... Um, for as long as I’ve been alive, strength has been the only thing that mattered... so...I can understand that feeling... To prove your strength, even at the cost of your life...” She searched for her words while her downcast gaze wandered over the ground. “B-But...well...um. It’s disappointing... I feel like, maybe...you shouldn’t die... At least... not before you pass on your knowledge...”

“Before I answer, there’s something I’d like to ask you, Qwell.”

The question had been on his mind ever since they had met.

Believing it would be discourteous to ask, he had held back until now, but it was an unavoidable question if he was going to fully comprehend this woman named Qwell the Wax Flower.

“If pursuing strength is your way of life, why haven’t you trained your body?”

“Oh, erm... Th-that’s...well...”

“I’m not talking about technique. I don’t know what sort of physical constitution you may have, but...if your delicate frame has this much physical strength, then honing your delicate frame to become even thicker would expand the scope of your ability. You can always train your muscles. Why don’t you?”

Qwell’s body was thin. Both her height and width would make it impossible to differentiate her from a town girl. She looked far from a warrior.

Because of her poor, hunching posture, she looked even smaller.

“...I—I...want a proper physique, too, if possible... Sometimes I even wish...I had been born a man. But n-no matter how hard I train...I...I can’t get any bigger than this...”

“You’re a minia, aren’t you? You absolutely can build more muscle.”

“R-right. Oh...but, um...that’s not it. It’s a s-strictly guarded secret...so.”

“...”

Psianop paused to see what she would say next.

It was a mere estimation based on their brief time together, but Psianop figured that Qwell didn’t often experience someone asking so persistently about her circumstances.

“...You know about vampires, right? They were a huge threat to the Kingdoms before the True Demon King, and...even now, their race’s numbers have been reduced significantly, but...”

“I know about their biology. Is that what you are?”

“O-originally...that might have been...what I was supposed to be.”

The sound of the wind rolling over the grass. The chirping of insects cut through the stillness of night.

Qwell smiled faintly.

“Apparently, we’re called dhampir. When we’re born, even if

our body's been remade...very rarely, we'll detoxify the vampire pathogen... We're a v-varietal race that's produced antibodies against infection..."

If a minia infected with the vampire virus gave birth to a child, the child would be a vampire, based off the minian form. Save for the blood and marrow that autonomously produces organisms, these creatures are almost no different from minia. However, the moment they come into existence, many emblematic genetic modifications from the virus appear.

Beautiful, well-proportioned facial features and a tenacious body to make it easier to come in direct contact with other members of their base body's species. The vampire virus gives its host advantageous qualities for its own proliferation, and is capable of continually maintaining said qualities.

"So, if your physical body's no different from a vampire's, the proportions you were born with won't change at all? Now I finally understand where that abnormal physical strength comes from."

"..."

Vampire bodies were meticulously designed at the cell stage and didn't need to be honed after the fact.

Since this was the work of the virus, there was no flexibility on the matter, either. Any deviation from the body that was perfectly constructed from birth was rejected on a cellular level.

"Th-that's why I know...it would be useless to strengthen myself, since...I was born strong...and even when I try to hone my technique, I always wonder if that's not by my own power, either..."

"There's no way all dhampir can reach the same level you're at."

"...Is that...really true? I wonder. If...if I had been born minia...what would've happened to me?"

The lone dhampir looked up at the small moon.

In some far-off region, the moon was said to symbolize the vampire.

"If, as a minia, I underwent the same training...what would have happened? Maybe my body would've gotten bigger...and I could've surpassed my current limits. Or perhaps...my honed training isn't really much of anything compared to all the other minia... and I might not have even gotten where I am now."

"Qwell..." Psianop spoke as if he was scolding her. "...I'm an

ooze.”

Psianop was burdened by the shackles of his race just as she was.

Being innately strong from birth, being innately weak from birth.

For those aiming for their martial peak, which was the more fortunate circumstance?

Surely none could measure such a thing.

“*Eh-heh... Eh-heh-heh*. Fair enough... You are an ooze.”

“You’ll grow strong. Your innate strength hasn’t made you overconfident, and you have the drive to reach even greater heights. I would go as far as to say that the only reason I’ve gotten to where I am is because I’m just like you.”

Psianop would fight his way through the Sixways Exhibition for as long as he could and then die. That alone was enough.

Yet even now, after defeating Toroa, a distracting thought had worked its way to the forefront of his mind.

“Qwell...I want to try passing my technique on to you.”

“.....!”

He had rested quite a bit today.

Still, he had time to spare.

“Want to go again?”

“I do.”

With her wide eyes peering through the gap in her bangs, Qwell smiled.



Her eyes held no prejudice and beheld only strength, regardless of background.

Psianop had embarked on his journey because, no matter where it was, be it the Kingdom twenty-one years later or somewhere else, he had trusted that a woman like her would be there.

“I would like to spar with you.”

In a corner of a quiet farm on the western side of Aureatia, there was an old mansion from the era of King Aur.

Hidow the Clamp had bought the house a few years back, but he didn't start living there until the first round of the Sixways Exhibition had ended and he had finished cleaning up after the raid by self-proclaimed demon king Alus.

Taking a walk after sunrise on a whim, he called for a tenant farmer to play a ball game, put a fistful of coins in the farmer's pocket, headed for the commercial district, and did not return until late at night.

He was now able to enjoy such a daily life.

Hidow, once extremely busy as the young Twentieth Minister, had been dismissed from Aureatia's Twenty-Nine Officials.

Alus the Star Runner, the hero candidate he had sponsored, had gone out of control and caused unprecedented damage to Aureatia. Even though this all happened after Alus had been knocked out of the tournament, Hidow couldn't get out of taking responsibility for the incident.

Now Hidow was the same as any other noble family's second son.

"I'm glad I quit before I was too old to throw a ball around."

Hidow would brag like this from time to time.

"If I'd remained in government, I'd grow old and gray, living the same dull life day in and day out."

This routine continued for several days, but it didn't last for very long.

That day, he had a guest. Hidow had finished his ball game and just returned home.

"Well now, it's been a while, Hidow the Clamp."

The old man was sitting in the manor's parlor as if he lived there.

Hidow hadn't invited him in nor had there been any prior contact about his visit. Yet despite all this, the old man's gnarled fingers and sunken eye sockets looked as if he was a corpse that had

been sitting there a long time after his death.

Behind the couch stood four attendants, all of them elves.

Being accompanied by slaves of other races was prohibited under the current laws. Of course, there wasn't anyone in Aureatia who could convict the old man for such a thing.

"The youngster I once knew has grown up so much. How touching..."

"How nice of you to say, Iriolde."

Despite how annoyed he felt, Hidow sat down across from the old man. Normally, it was the seat for guests.

...The former Fifth Minister, Iriolde the Atypical Tome. A monster within the noble sphere, he had been driven out of the Aureatia Assembly shortly before the Sixways Exhibition began. If Rosclay and Jelky hadn't gone ahead and *handled* him, Iriolde would have unquestionably commanded a colossal faction—far bigger than Kaete or Haade's—and threatened the tournament.

This man was attempting to reach out to Hidow, who had been dismissed from the Aureatia Assembly, just as he had been.

"Seems like you've gotten pretty big yourself. Attitude-wise, that is. Gone so senile that now you're strolling into another guy's home without so much as a hello, huh? I don't remember ever giving you the address to this villa either."

"*Kweh, heh*. You shouldn't be so cruel to a lonely old man... especially now that you and I are both in the same position."

"Hate to say it, but unlike you, I'm not lonely at all."

"The Star Runner affair tugged at my heartstrings as well."

"Liar."

"Anyone who *doesn't* feel that way may as well have no heart at all, wouldn't you agree? No one took greater pains to ensure the safety of Aureatia's citizenry, prepared nonstop against the threat Alus posed...and in truth, kept the casualties as minimal as possible while attempting to subdue him. Yet, despite this heroic achievement, no one recognized your efforts, and even assigned you all the blame, casting you out..."

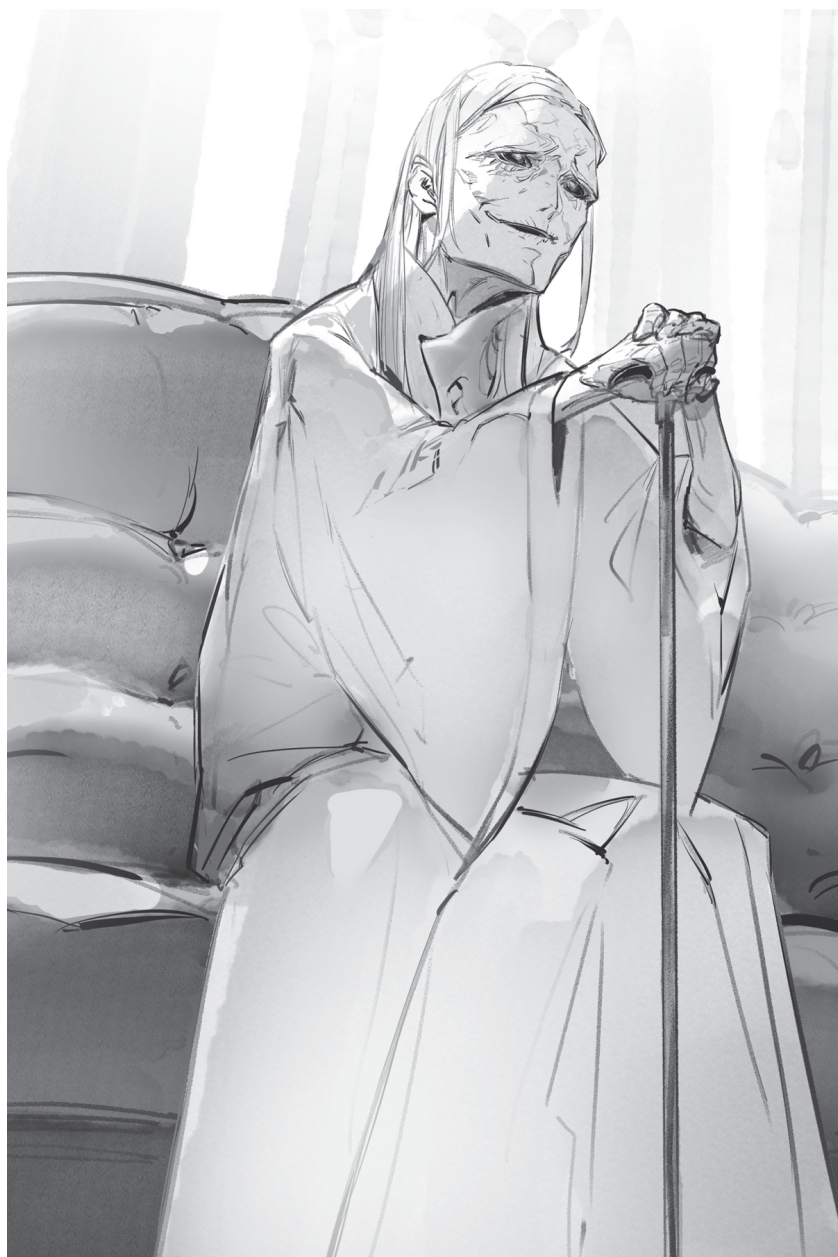
His wrinkled expression appeared exceedingly peaceful and mild.

Nevertheless, as long as Iriolde was the one he was dealing with, the most dangerous thing Hidow could do was to guess the man's psyche from his facial expressions. Any of the Twenty-Nine Officials who knew Iriolde during his tenure as Fifth Minister had

learned this all too well.

“They haven’t changed at all since they drove me out, have they? They’re set in their archaic ways. They’re overbearing, always scapegoating... Always smothering young talent without a second thought. I’ve heard all about what happened with Elea the Red Tag as well. Such a deplorable way to handle things, truly...”

“I’ll say this one more time. Unlike you...I wasn’t dismissed because I committed fraud. Everything you’re going on about is widely off the mark,” Hidow brazenly replied, though without dropping his guard. “Would you like to know the way to achieve true victory in the Sixways Exhibition, Iriolde? *Drop out before you lose...* Ever since Alus began to act, I thought I’d be the one to bring this solution to the table. This way, no one in Aureatia is gonna nominate me for anything. I threw my hands up and got out.”



Rosclay's camp's stratagem to dispose of whichever strongest dragonkin survived their clash in the second match—whether it was Alus the Star Runner or Lucnoca the Winter—by then making them out to be a self-proclaimed demon king, had needed someone to take responsibility from the beginning.

However, Hidow the Clamp had set his sights square on the role. Having been brilliant from birth, he wanted tranquility completely divorced from a lifetime of responsibility.

"*Kweh, heh*. You really are sharp. It's quite a pity, Hidow... If you have such foresight, then you should have also known what was going to happen here in Aureatia already."

"What are you talking about? Like I give a damn."

"...One of the hero candidates went mad and ran roughshod over Aureatia. Now that this has happened, even the citizens will come to the realization sooner or later."

The sixteen strongest in the land, gathered together to determine the one true Hero.

The people had now learned. Once one of these shura bared their fangs, the only ones who could possibly stand up to them were other shura. Furthermore, such a battle was assuredly not something the citizens could treat with indifference, potentially threatening their own way of life.

"In the fourth match...the true champion, Rosclay the Absolute, was rendered disabled by Kia the World Word. Then in the sixth match...Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge suddenly vanished with Kaete the Round Table and Kiyazuna the Axle after openly committing an injustice in front of the general public. None of them have been found as of yet."

"..."

"What do you think? From the people's perspective, they must be fearsome threats, yes? On top of that, now that Zigita Zogi the Thousandth is defeated, how will the heretofore docile goblins... and the Okafu mercenaries siding with them, act now? I'm sure that Dant the Heath Furrow will be unable to fully keep them in check."

"You've really been doing your homework, hmm? I applaud your effort. "

"Oh, that's not all, though. These aren't the only factors that're causing you all to worry, are they?"

Iriolde lightly coughed and then took a sip from the water flask his attendant handed to him.

“Jelky made the announcement the other day, didn’t he? That a large number of corpses had slipped into the castle garden theater.”

“...Yeah. Seems like there really was a vampire. Who the hell knows how far the infection’s ultimately spread...”

The invisible army. There was a theory that the truth behind this unidentified group was the man sitting in front of him.

The only certainty was that there was more than one vampire at work. However, there was still the question of which organization’s intents these main vampires were working under. Even agreeing with the theory that they were the remnants of Obsidian Eyes, the spy guild Obsidian Eyes had always acted under the orders of another organization during wartime.

Zeljirga the Abyss Web is a member of Obsidian Eyes. There’s no way Enu doesn’t know something. Not that anyone knows where that guy is or what he’s up to right now...

“Now that is quite terrifying news, Hidow. A disease once thought exterminated, slipping into the Sixways Exhibition...and we’re left anxiously waiting for the moment when the vampires turn their blades on us... On top of all that, I have heard that the Old Kingdoms’ loyalists are making some suspicious movements of their own.”

Fourth Minister Kaete and the self-proclaimed demon king Kiyazuna, who had planned to revolt against Aureatia.

Goblins and the Free City of Okafu, dissident elements that had used the Sixways Exhibition to worm their way into Aureatia.

The invisible army, hypothesized to be led by an unidentified vampire threat.

On top of that, the almighty threat of Kia the World Word, whom they still hadn’t been able to take any countermeasures against.

“...Given all this, even I myself, who had no intentions of getting involved with any of this...am forced to act. Surely, from here on out...these threats will continue to appear one after another; weapons unknown to you all, self-proclaimed demon kings that you thought had disappeared... Or, perhaps, aberrations as powerful as the hero candidates may even make moves of their own...”

...*What is he saying?*

Iriolde wasn't referring to the threats they had been talking about up until now.

He was talking *about something else entirely*.

But then, why was there any need for him to purposely bring such information to Hidow?

"Irrelevant. None of this concerns you or me."

"Kweh, heh. You see, Hidow, when you get up there in years... the voices you hear start to get louder and louder. I myself desire tranquility, and yet someone will come and talk my ears off...asking if I have wisdom to impart or if there's anything I can do for them with my power. For someone with no power at all, it's a truly distressing situation... Wouldn't you say, Hidow...?"

"What were you doing...in the first round?"

Iriolde was making his moves and preparing with a keen grasp on the various incidents that had occurred during the Sixways Exhibition, including the matters which Aureatia was restricting information about.

Clearly, he had started making moves long ago.

However, if Iriolde himself was putting his name out there, then Rosclay and his group definitely had a grasp on his movements. In which case, he had a pawn who could act openly mixed in among the participants of the Sixways Exhibition...

"...You-you've been manipulating someone in secret...haven't you?"

"Who's to say? It's certainly not a particularly important matter..."

Several facts linked together in the back of Hidow's mind.

If the distinguished player in the shadows, expelled from the Aureatia Assembly for planning to reform and overthrow the status quo, happened to be manipulating the current political situation...

...Haade? Taking advantage of the Sixways Exhibition, he's openly flown a flag of revolt against Rosclay's faction. If there was someone secretly backing him from the start to bring him a chance to succeed... The leader of the military faction, and the noble class's mastermind. If these two were working together, then there is definitely no one who could hope to stop them...

The Twenty-Seventh General, leading Aureatia's military. Haade the Flashpoint commanded a massive faction, second only to Rosclay the Absolute's own.

Soujirou the Willow-Sword, the candidate he was sponsoring,

was also set to battle Rosclay the Absolute in the next match.

If, in anticipating a direct confrontation, Iriolde, his backer waiting in the shadows, was also revealing himself, then...

"You mustn't forget what's important point here, Hidow. Before long, Aureatia is going to be shaken to its core. A much bigger disturbance...bigger than the Alus incident you took responsibility for after putting your life at risk...will come. When that time comes, I wonder how the assembly will face it..."

"What are you getting at?"

"They'll need someone to take the fall once more, won't they...? Like many self-proclaimed demon kings have done in the past...or, just as the True Demon King once did, if you will. The people certainly aren't going to be satisfied unless someone assumes the villain role..."

His fingers, like a withered tree branch, slowly pointed at Hidow.

"That could be, for example, someone that the organization has no problem discarding. Someone they've already branded... Don't you agree? Like you, or me."

"...Well. That's a very...childish threat, Iriolde."

Despite his smile, a cold sweat ran down Hidow's temple.

He couldn't completely refute the possibility. Even he understood that *any retirement to a life of leisure and peace* was nothing more than a nigh fantastical show of courage.

It was all but impossible for the Sixways Exhibition to simply end without anything else happening. Assuming there was, as Iriolde suggested, a massive political shift in Aureatia—and the situation could be contained by offering up Hidow's name as the mastermind behind it all—then he agreed that Rosclay and Jelky *might* do something like that.

The trust he placed in their ability, in fact, made it impossible to dismiss.

"What do you think, Hidow...? What if it was possible to stick their side with the responsibility, rather than us losers? Would you then be interested in working hard just one more time?"

"I'll say it again: I'm not like you. I'm not interested in getting dragged back into all these schemes."

"I value your abilities highly. I'm sure that with your aid, we'll emerge victorious..."

"Mind if I pass along everything you've told me to Rosclay? Hit

the road.”

Absurd. A terrible joke, all of it.

Hidow wished he had been incompetent. He didn't want to exhaust his effort for the sake of another any more than he already had. Even if he could foresee future catastrophe, he exited the stage of political strife because he didn't want to get involved in any of it.

“...I've had enough of a life of nonstop headaches.”

“Really, now? Sorry, then. Well, I'll be going...”

Iriolde slowly rose from his seat, grabbing the wall and the arms of his attendants for support.

Hidow felt repulsed by his way of standing up. An attachment to life. Despite reaching such an old age, Iriolde the Atypical Tome still hadn't given up on living.

“That's right... There's one other unfortunate bit of information I have for you, Hidow.”

“...You finally getting out of here overshadows any more bad news. But what is it?”

“Since you were the one to shoulder the blame for the destruction Alus wrought, there are many citizens who bear a grudge against you... Now that you've been dismissed from the assembly, you don't have much of an escort detail with you, either. At that point...if there was some unforeseen accident, it might be difficult to find the culprit...”

An elf attendant unlocked the door in the back of the parlor. It was a room Hidow hadn't normally used.

Hidow thought he saw a big shadow move inside the room. He frowned.

“...All right, what's this about...?”

As soon as the door opened, a middle-aged man flew from the room.

He was someone Hidow had never laid eyes on before. The man was grungy, and likely didn't do too well for himself.

There was the sound of pottery shattering. The man stepped over the table with dirty shoes, brandished a knife, and slashed at Hidow.

Hidow narrowly managed to lift a couch cushion and block the weapon.

“H-Hidow the Clamp!”

“What the hell's your problem?!” he shouted as he twisted his body, trying to wrestle away the knife stuck into the cushion, but

his voice had definitely cracked. The man's thick arm took hold of Hidow's scarf. He tried to grab Hidow's neck.

"G-get off!"

Hidow struggled with all his might and roughly kicked the man away. He had opened space between them. Despite it, the man got back up, his eyes still bloodshot, to continue his awkward rush.

This time, Hidow was able to dodge to the side. With the momentum of the man's charge, he slammed into the picture on the wall, smashing part of the picture frame, and cutting his brow.

What the hell? Who is this guy?

This was Hidow's own house. How did a suspicious guy like this suddenly sneak in?

Actually, first of all—

Iriolde had intruded into the manor without any notice that he was stopping by. What about the locks? The only explanation he could think of was that one of the servants had let him in. When he considered the influence Iriolde commanded, it wasn't difficult to imagine.

Hidow's attacker breathed raggedly as he tried to stand up.

"Hwoo, hwo...hwoo, I'll kill you, I-I'll kill you..."

It was evident that this wasn't a warrior who had undergone proper combat training.

A twitching smile came to Hidow's face. He had realized the answer.

"...You're kidding me."

"Give me back, koff, my family... It's all...it's all your fault...!"

The man went to pick up the hat rack in the corner of the room to use as a spear. It didn't seem like it would make for much of a weapon, but rather, it seemed to convey the man's murderous rage.

"It's...all my fault, is it?"

This guy needed to actually think about it for a minute. Alus was the one who was truly responsible, right? Did this guy really think there was anyone who could've anticipated the destruction Alus would bring to Aureatia?

Hidow had grown so tired of dealing with these idiots that it made him want to beat the man within an inch of his life.

Swinging the hat stand, the man struck at Hidow.

Hidow swung his own fist up high.

"Aaaarggh!"

"Urngh!"

The man bent backward and collapsed. A hard ball had hit him squarely in the face.

Hidow had just returned from playing ball. He had one still in his pocket.

The ball bounced twice along the floor and rolled back to Hidow's feet.

"*Hah-hah, hah-hah-hah-hah...*"

A cold sweat was pouring like a waterfall from Hidow's brow, but someone was laughing as if truly enjoying himself.

Iriolde.

"*Hah-hah-hah-hah...hah-hah-hah-hah...* Ahh, that was fantastic. So very *desperate*."

"You bastard."

"You're still so young...and you say you want nothing. That you don't mind if you're the focus of public contempt. It's not good to speak...as if you have it all figured out, *since you don't understand anything*. When someone's after your life...even when your opponent's such a pitiful pauper..."

Iriolde jabbed the collapsed man with his cane. The intruder groaned and tried to get up, but one of Iriolde's bodyguards instantly sat on his joints and constrained him.

"...you're still forced into desperation."

"You're the one...who set this all up in the first place."

Iriolde's group had brought someone with a grudge against Hidow—most likely a survivor from either the second or fifth borough of the Eastern Outer Ward—and shut him away in the room past the parlor until Hidow had returned home.

It was the only explanation he could think of, given the situation. Anyone would come to the same conclusion.

"Oh, it's just a coincidence. A mere coincidence. *Kweh, kweh...* Unfortunately, we weren't able to notice the lawless intruder. Neither you nor myself. However, we could collaborate...to make sure something like this never happens again."

"A childish threat."

"That's right. I can be immature, you see."

The elf bodyguard nonchalantly drew a gun.

Hidow gulped. *Run. Cover.* The thoughts ran through his head, but his legs couldn't keep up. He felt that he was going to be killed.

The sound of a gunshot rang out.

The bodyguard had shot through the head of the man

restrained at her feet. A second gunshot followed.

The first shot caused the man's head to burst like an overripe melon. Among its pulpy contents were the white seedlike fragments of his skull.

"....."

"Kweh, kweh. Hah-hah-hah-hah...hah-hah-hah."

Iriolde chuckled with glee.

"Just a joke, of course. Please, Hidow, there's no need to worry."

"Y-You... You killed him..."

Iriolde had committed murder inside Hidow's manor.

On top of it, Iriolde was visiting without any prior notice. There wouldn't be any records of his call left behind.

Hidow needed some explanation—at the very least, an explanation that wouldn't throw his tranquil life into chaos.

"Well then, until we meet again. Hidow the Clamp."

The sun was setting. Even after Iriolde had departed, Hidow remained seated on the couch in the pitch-black parlor with his head in his hands.

"...Dammit..."

He wanted tranquility, where he could remain indifferent to everything.

He wanted the terror brought by the True Demon King to be returned to normal for good.

When would that finally come to him? Would this go on into eternity?

"Every damn last one of them...needs to quit roping me into this crap...!"

As long as one lived in this world, it was impossible to remain totally unconnected to the fight to choose the sole Hero.

They would keep on getting wrapped up in this destiny of life and death run amok.

No matter who they were.

“Heeey! She over there?”

“Nah, ain’t here! Probably hiding in one of the wood boxes or bags outside a store, yeah? Just a tiny kid ’n’ all.”

“This whole thing’s starting to feel ridiculous. I’m beat, too. Wanna head home?”

The scoundrels’ voices echoed through the narrow street along the channel.

They seemed to be chasing after someone, but there wasn’t any tension in their voices. They sounded almost pastoral, even.

If they really want to capture me... Kia thought.

She could clearly hear what the men were talking about since she was sitting down on the corner right beside where they were chatting.

However, she had concealed herself with Word Arts.

...Then they should try being a bit more desperate about it. It’s appalling, honestly.

Kia the World Word was a mere fourteen years old, and she was the subject of an unprecedented manhunt by Aureatia since she was an almighty Word Arts caster who had brought Rosclay the Absolute to the brink of death in the fourth match.

Nevertheless, no matter how many ruffians they lured in with her bounty like this, no matter how shrewd of a detective or hunter they employed, or even if they mobilized Aureatia’s world-largest military force in its entirety, it was inconceivable that Kia would be captured.

She could deal with low-level grunts simply by making herself invisible like this, and even if she needed to run, she could go through walls or even fly up into the air. She could create her own food so she wouldn’t starve, and far beyond that, she could even take baths and make her own bedding, too.

If they fought her head-on, her enemy’s chances of victory were even more hopeless. As long as nothing strange happened like it had in the arena against Rosclay, there was no way another person would best Kia’s omnipotent Word Arts.

After all, I'm totally invincible...

The scoundrels' voices faded into the distance, but it wouldn't be for long. For today, it was best for her not to reveal herself in this area.

Although she was able to turn everything into reality, she was in doubt.

She had an objective: To vindicate Elea the Red Tag's besmirched name, whom she had separated from following the fourth match.

In that match, the one who had truly acted dishonestly was Rosclay—Kia wasn't the one who deserved to be chased.

However, if she was going to wield her all-powerful Word Arts, *what were the correct steps to follow* in order to lead things toward her desired outcome?

Maybe, if the law...like the highest legal authority decided I was right, would everyone understand that Rosclay was at fault? I don't even know the faces of Aureatia's Twenty-Nine Officials. Whose decision would it be to forgive Elea...and how am I supposed to talk to them to get them to understand?

There might not have been any need to convince them. Kia thought that as long as she wielded absolute power, she should be able to make anyone listen to what she had to say.

Yet each time she imagined her doing so, the wretched sight of Rosclay during the fourth match floated up from the back of her mind. Assuming she was capable of using extreme violence in negotiation, if whoever she talked to was just as unbreakable as Rosclay was...would the lone young girl Kia be unable to do anything once again?

...Sephite.

Her entangled, circular questions always came back to the simplest conclusion.

The Queen's the highest authority in Aureatia, after all. Obviously, the Queen is going to have more authority than the government or the law's...super-important person. Besides, with Sephite...

She recalled Sephite's face. She had been a pale and beautiful girl, like a flower.

Though she was queen, she was still an eleven-year-old girl. Kia had even studied together with her at Iznock Royal High School.

That said, Kia certainly couldn't claim that they were friends. They had shared a dubious relationship.

I could talk to her...without using Word Arts to threaten her. It's possible...maybe. I was even thinking that I'd really try to be better friends with her the next time we met, too...

Sephite must not have wanted to see the Sixways Exhibition rife with foul play, either.

The only thing Kia could do was to make contact with Sephite, get her to understand the Kia and Elea's current situation, and exert her influence in Aureatia somehow. From what Kia could understand, this seemed like the most realistic idea.

There was, however, a problem with this plan, too. Under the present circumstances—with her being a wanted criminal and widely recognized as a villain—when, and how, exactly, could she make contact with Sephite and get her to listen to Kia's explanation...?

"I knew it, the brat's over in this alley! See, you guys did miss something!"

The men, running back with heavy footsteps, broke down the wooden boxes piled up in the alleyway and rudely peeked into the residential homes. Passersby merely shot them disapproving glares.

"C'mon, let's call it... We'll get more money hunting down corpses and stuff."

"Yeah, right. It's hard to know even how many of those we'll find. The bounty's not much, neither."

"Oh, you didn't know, Boss? Catch one corpse and you can make more, so depending on how you go about it..."

They really are worthless...

Kia sighed. Seeing these types made her remember Jivlart the Ash Border, which soured her mood completely. Every time she thought of him, Kia felt her distaste for his *unscrupulous* way of doing things intensify.

Although she was wanted on false charges, Kia bore the slightest bit of responsibility and was against anything that would continue to cause trouble for others.

So, she simply needed to quiet them a little bit.

Yet, after she took her breath, she wavered slightly.

If I said, "Sleep"...would that clog up the street?

"An insolent bunch, aren't they?"

"Huh?" A surprised gasp escaped her mouth instead of her Word Arts.

The young man, wearing a red feathered cap, was standing still

beside Kia. From the neck down, he was dressed in an overcoat that seemed to just be a regular pullover, and she couldn't really tell what was underneath.

His facial features were youthful and clean-cut, yet his expression was anything but natural.

"No need to fear. My name is Acromdo the Variety. I've come to help you."

He was talking next to Kia while she was invisible, so to any onlooker, he seemed to be mumbling to himself. Was he actually talking to her?

Before any of that, though—

Who is this person...?

Kia wasn't acquainted with anyone like this, and she couldn't understand how he was so certain that Kia was there to speak with her.

Kia was only visually concealing her form at present; that much was true. Had he become cognizant of her location from the almost imperceptible traces of her scent and the sounds of her breathing?

Acromdo fixed his aim on the three ruffians continuing their search one alleyway over from where they were.

"Fwoo..."

Heaving ragged breaths, his body lurched to the side.

It was a bizarre movement, like a scarecrow toppling over.

The explosive striking sound echoed all the way to Kia's position.

"Ah...!" Kia gasped, wholly forgetting that she was concealing herself.

One of the ruffian's heads splattered. The shattered remains of his skull adorned a minian arm. The arm, launched at super-high speeds, had reduced the man's head to a mess of blood, meat, and bone shrapnel.

Whose arm was that?

As an aftereffect of the movement, Acromdo's overcoat flapped in the wind as he stood right next to her. Underneath, the right arm that was supposed to be there was gone. It was his. Kia couldn't possibly imagine why, or what sort of benefit this technique even had, however—

He had *removed his own flesh-and-blood arm, sent it flying*, and killed the man standing on the other side of the alleyway.

"Whoa?! What the hell's all this?!"

“E-eep, he’s, he’s dead...”

The remaining two men were delayed noticing their companion, killed without even the sound of a gunshot, and they rushed over to the corpse. If they were on the battlefield, the pair likely wouldn’t have moved so carelessly.

However, this was Aureatia, in broad daylight. Even shady men like them couldn’t have imagined that someone would be trying to kill them without reason in the land’s biggest, and supposedly safest, metropolis.

Kia saw the right arm autonomously fly off the wall, as if it had been spring loaded.

The two men, focused on the corpse, didn’t notice. Tracing a loose parabola as it fell, the right arm landed on the back of the closer man’s head and grabbed the nape of his neck.

“Ngh, hrgh...hrgnnngh!”

“...! Stop!”

Kia stood up without thinking.

Lifting the Word Arts concealing her, she yelled at Acromdo. There wasn’t any point in continuing to hide herself. “Do you have any idea what you’re doing?!”

“...? Well, I’m disposing of these villains who are chasing after you, am I not? Did I do something to upset you?”

“...Something to upset me? *Of course* I’d be upset about that! Nothing’s more annoying than someone acting like they’re doing me a favor by killing lowlifes! Make that arm stop!”

Kia looked sidelong at the man across the way. He was being strangled, and his arms and legs were thrashing wildly about.

“Now!”

“Okay. Got it.”

Acromdo seemed dissatisfied as he raised his left arm.

The right arm that was gripping the man went limp at the same time.

“I apologize for any offense. Erm... I also apologize for my lack of judgment. I really just wanted to become friends with you. I figured that if you were being chased by the Aureatia army, then I could help you out...”

“Well I don’t *need* the help. Are you serious? *You’re* the one who should get captured by the Aureatia army.”

“Sorry. It’s just... Honestly, I really... I thought that killing the bad guys chasing you would garner me praise, if anything...but if

you're saying that wasn't good, then I'd like to think of some way to make it up to you."

"Never come near me again. You give me the creeps."

"Hmmm... I'll try."

Although she was chewing him out, Kia couldn't keep her mind off Acromdo's right shoulder.

It wasn't hard, as artificial arms typically were. It looked unmistakably like a cross section of a flesh and blood body. While he may be able to attack like that, how had he intended to use the arm afterward? Acromdo had the appearance of a minia, but what was the logic behind his ability to manipulate his severed arm like that?

Even with her omnipotent Word Arts, this was one technique that Kia had no interest in using herself...

"Hey! That brat...!" The unharmed ruffian shouted as he tried to wake up the other one collapsed on the ground. "Get up! Kia's here! She's probably the one who blew off our bro's head!"

"Oh great, now them too..."

Her only choice was to flee from this district as well.

Her frustration and anger messily jumbled inside her chest like paint, melting together. Kia had never killed anyone before. She was even *being nice enough* to avoid killing them, too.

"*Vanish, flow.*"

Mumbling her Word Arts, she followed up shortly afterward with a command. "Don't follow me. I mean it."

"I get it. But what do I have to do to become friends with you?"

"..." Kia didn't answer and immediately left the area by turning invisible and speeding along the ground.

No matter how skilled one may have been, no one in the world could track down Kia.

Running, hiding... It's nothing but this over and over again.

Just how long had it been since she had spoken to a store clerk or a kid her age?

She had no need for such mundane things with her power, of course. She would likely never know "need" again. She could manifest anything she required, and she did need to rely on friends to aid her.

However, amidst the emotions in her chest, coalescing like many shades of paint, there was one color that would always remain.

...I want to see somebody. I want to talk with Elea again. If I head back home, then I'd...

With her omnipotent powers, was it possible for her to erase these very thoughts from her head too?



Acromdo the Variety stood motionless in the alley, even after Kia's departure.

His mission was to secure Kia the World Word before Aureatia could, but he didn't intend on chasing after her, either.

Since that was what he had been asked to do.

"Instead of bringing her along by force, I'm supposed to build a friendly relationship and have her join our side... There shouldn't be anything wrong with the plan itself, so she must've had some problem with my behavior—"

"Move outta the way, you idiot! Which way did that brat run off to...?!"

The ruffian shoved Acromdo. He was dragging his gasping buddy behind him.

Acromdo had been the one who caused their wounds, but whether it was because his severed-arm attack had been too fast to detect, or because the ruffian was too frenzied to see sense, it appeared he hadn't caught on to that fact yet.

"That's it! I can just have you guys chase after her for me."

"What the hell are you mumbling about? You wanna die?"

"Oh, it's just, she'll dislike me if I go after her myself, so..."

Acromdo's left arm blurred.

A light cracking sound, like a bug being crushed, echoed with a delay.

"Gahak!"

A dull sound escaped from both ruffian's throats, neither a voice nor a scream.

It was the sound of their blood gushing out all at once from a deep cut.

Acromdo finished the follow-through of his left hand, spread out flat. In the midday metropolis, he had ended both of their lives in an instant, the method a complete mystery.

"How about you two help me out with something...?"

“.....”

“.....”

The citizens passing by hadn't realized the abnormal phenomenon unfolding.

The two men, killed in an instant, *hadn't fallen over*. Not only the one standing, but even the man borrowing the standing man's arm, dragging his feet along, was supporting his own body weight and still upright.

The bleeding from the wounds on their throats had almost stopped as well. Acromdo cleanly wiped up the blood with his large scarf.

“Okay, you can go now.”

The two ruffians started walking in the direction Kia had gone. Their stilted footsteps seemed almost like the movements of a doll being forcibly manipulated by someone else.

Acromdo wiped the blood from his fingers.

He was smiling, but there was still an unnatural edge on his face.

“I wonder what I have to do to get everyone to like me.”

Half of the Sixways Exhibition matches had concluded, and the remaining participants would need to make their next moves sooner rather than later.

The same rang true for those who had yet to emerge from the shadows.

He didn't want to open his eyes.

It wouldn't make a difference either way.

Kuuro the Cautious had clearly perceived the surrounding scenery even with his eyes closed.

However, he no longer possessed the willpower to lift his eyelids.

More than the fact he had lingered on the verge of death from his burns, Kuuro felt helpless by the betrayal committed by Obsidian Eyes, and he ended up exposing his precious friends Cuneigh, Toroa, and Mizial to danger.

A carpet-bomb of cluster munitions was what drove Kuuro to the brink of death. Most likely, they had manipulated Mestelexil to blow up the whole clinic with him to take every possible precaution before they enacted their operation during the eighth match.

Kuuro truly hadn't the faintest intention of opposing Obsidian Eyes.

Nevertheless, Obsidian Eyes had gone this far merely to *take every possible precaution*.

As not to reveal anything to Kuuro, who could become their natural enemy.

He was already fed up with it all.

If I don't wake up, I won't have to see anything.

He was lying in a fairly luxurious hospital bed.

His whole body, up to his face, was almost entirely covered in bandages. The unique smell of Life Arts-induced regeneration, and the feeling of thickly applied ointment. The heat and pain from the severe burns.

There was a window close by and a small table that held a pitcher of water. There were two doors—one to the hallway and one to the neighboring room.

In the back of the room sat a huge desk, and a woman was there writing a log. She appeared to be in her early thirties, but she was likely a bit older than that. Her long hair was a vaguely greenish-gray color, and she was approximately as tall as an adult

man. The fact that she was using script to record a log meant she wasn't a nurse, but a doctor; she likely was someone in a position of nobility or close to it. From the extent of her vocal cords' development, Kuuro could see the characteristics of a Life Arts user.

Even with his eyes shut tight, the Clairvoyance he possessed from birth perceived all this information.

Looking over at Kuuro's bed, the woman spoke.

"Regained consciousness, have we, Kuuro?"

"....."

"*Hee-hee*. See, you secrete a different amount of saliva when you're sleeping versus when you're awake. Your throat moves to swallow, as well."

As she spoke, the woman approached the bed.

"Though I'm sure Obsidian Eyes must have some techniques to conceal these physiological reactions too, don't they?"

"...Where am I?" Kuuro asked, with his eyes still closed.

At the very least, he knew this couldn't be the same clinic where Toroa had been hospitalized. That had been annihilated in Mestelexil's bombing attack.

After Kuuro had let Toroa and the others escape, he had dived into a well, slipping through a gap in the fire scattered by the incendiary bombs and narrowly escaping with his life.

But at the very least, he understood that without quickly receiving the latest cutting-edge medical treatment—including skin grafting—along with top-caliber Life Arts, there was a high probability he would have still ended up dead.

"I can't tell you where."

"What's your name...?"

When he opened his eyes, the woman, wearing a serene smile, matched his gaze.

As he was all wrapped up in bandages, Kuuro looked like some sort of monster.

"I'm Viga the Clamor."

"...Viga. You're the woman...providing Word Arts support to Rosclay."

Ownopellal the Bone Watcher, tasked with generating straight swords through Craft Arts.

Ekirehhy the Blood Fountain, tasked with bodily enhancements through Life Arts.

Antel the Alignment, tasked with aiding Rosclay's movements

with Force Arts.

Finally, Viga the Clamor, tasked with generating electric currents with Thermal Arts.

For the hero candidates, the Word Arts backup Rosclay received was now basically an open secret.

“I—koff.”

When Kuuro tried to speak in longer phrases, his throat seared with pain.

With a cough, he accepted the water Viga offered him and took a swig.

“...I was...recovered by...Rosclay’s camp?”

“Hmm, who’s to say?”

“Or not...it sounds like.”

Kuuro’s Clairvoyance made any attempt at lying utterly pointless.

He could determine if someone was telling the truth or lying just by observing their responses to his questioning.

In other words, Viga was providing support to Rosclay while also acting with motives that differed from his camp.

“...Just tell me yourself if possible. Koff, it’s meaningless to try keeping it a secret...”

“Do you know the name ‘Iriolde the Atypical Tome?’”

Kuuro nodded slightly. A monster from the Central Kingdom era who wielded secretive influence among Aureatia’s upper class. When Rehart the Obsidian was still alive, Obsidian Eyes had been commissioned by Iriolde several times.

...That’s how it had been in Toghie City when I was there, too. Despite having a name like Gilnes the Ruined Castle, the fact that they were able to establish a single town as a base of operations as easily as they did could have only been because they had a massive supporter backing them... Iriolde the Atypical Tome’s just about the only one capable of such a feat while being in opposition to Aureatia.

“I guess you could say...we’re all people who have received support from Master Iriolde. He’s the one who arranged for your treatment, you know.”

While he was attending to Toroa, Kuuro had tried to learn all the information he could regarding Aureatia’s current state of affairs, but after the start of the Sixways Exhibition, Iriolde hadn’t appeared to make any conspicuous moves of his own.

Perhaps it hadn’t been necessary... Or perhaps he had already

begun to make his move.

“So basically...you’re double-crossing Rosclay...”

“Hmm, I wonder... Am I double-crossing him? Only time will tell, I suppose!”

“So...what do you plan...on making me do...by helping me recover...?”

“Let me give you some news before I get to my request. Toroa the Awful is dead.”

“.....!”

Kuuro tried to stand up, but the intense pain that rushed across his skin stopped him.

“...He died?! *Koff*, that can’t be!”

Kuuro had risked his life to ensure Toroa escaped— No. Even if Kuuro hadn’t taken such action himself, even when he faced off against opponents like Mestelexil or the Particle Storm, it was impossible to believe that the ultimate enchanted swordsman could be killed.

“It must’ve been the day after we brought you here, I think. Toroa traveled to the Mali Wastes and picked a fight with Alus the Star Runner underground who was unconscious in a fissure. We have testimony from Psianop who was at the Wastes when it all went down, so I’m pretty sure the information’s good.

“H-has anyone...found the body?”

“Nope. But after he fought Toroa, Alus the Star Runner attacked Aureatia and caused a huge amount of damage to the city. It was concluded that Toroa had been annihilated without leaving a body behind. After all, between Ground Runner and Hillensingen the Luminous Blade... Alus had a buncha magic tools like that.”

“You’re lying...”

Kuuro firmly shut his eyelids. He stretched out the skin on his face, and the pain from his burns was agonizing, but he still wanted to close his eyes. Even if, with Kuuro’s Clairvoyance, it was a meaningless gesture.

“All of this was reported as the results of Aureatia’s official investigation into the matter. You can tell if I’m lying or not just by looking at me, can’t you?”

“...”

Why did he do something like that?

Kuuro’s belief in Toroa’s strength was why he had entrusted Mizial and Cuneigh to him in the first place. Despite understanding

that—despite learning what peaceful happiness felt like—did that just mean revenge against Alus the Star Runner was simply that much of a tremendous force inside Toroa the Awful?

If the dwarf had been standing in front of him, Kuuro would have wanted to interrogate him about it all. However, his Clairvoyance, capable of seeing even into the future, still couldn't read the heart of someone who wasn't there—much less someone who had died.

“Well, then.”

Viga lightly brought her hands together, her smile ever present on her face.

“Now that you understand all of that, I'll go ahead and pass on Master Iriolde's request, okay? With the opening of the Sixways Exhibition...as I'm sure you're already aware, Master Rosclay's reformation faction has committed many dishonest acts, beginning first with purging any antagonistic elements. As such, our camp now needs someone to protect us.”

“You plan...on turning me...into a killer again?”

“Yup! We'll be giving you plenty of compensation for it, of course. Also, given our organizational power...we can also promise to keep Mizial and Cuneigh out of Master Rosclay's clutches, too.”

“...You fiend.”

This had been this woman's intent behind telling Kuuro of Toroa's death from the start.

After Toroa's death, Iriolde's camp had encircled Cuneigh and Mizial before any other of the factions could. Which likely meant they could dispose of them at any time.

“I mean, you're so strong, it'd be such a waste otherwise, right?” Viga said, looking truly mystified with one hand against her cheek. “If you don't want to...you could just kill me right now and leave Aureatia, you know. Mizial's got nothing to do with you at all, for one, and... I mean, you could make however many little Cuneighs you wanted if you felt like it.”

“...Make?”

Kuuro felt an intense, nondescript sickening feeling. He had determined who she was with, but who exactly was Viga herself?

From the very beginning, this woman *had been telling him nothing but the truth.*

“Oh, actually, you didn't know, did you?”

Antel the Alignment. Ownopellal the Bone Watcher. Ekirehjy

the Blood Fountain.

The other three people providing Word Arts support to Rosclay had clear and fixed positions in society.

Antel the Alignment was Aureatia's Twenty-Eighth Minister. He was known as a faithful bureaucrat.

Ownopellal the Bone Watcher was a celebrated instructor at Iznock Royal High School.

Ekirehjy the Blood Fountain was the chief medical adviser to the royal family, having risen from being appointed a civilian worker for the army.

Which then only left this woman, Viga the Clamor.

While clearly specializing in Life Arts, she focused solely on providing Thermal Art support. It meant that she was in a position that required her to conceal her true aptitude.

"I was the one who made little Cuneigh."

"..."

It was impossible for a homunculus like Cuneigh to come about naturally.

Without someone possessing a tremendous amount of power creating her themselves.

"A self-proclaimed...demon king...!"

"Want me to make a second one, just for you, Kuuro?"

Viga the Clamor smiled. Perhaps it was the only expression she *could* make.

In a part of the Timu Great Canal that flowed through central Aureatia, there had been a culvert constructed unbeknownst to anyone.

The construction to lay the culvert had been secretly ordered during urban planning to ensure it wasn't recorded anywhere. However, the actual construction was carried out entirely in the open; even the craftsmen tasked with building it believed it to be an official public works project. Since no one questioned it, it was never exposed.

Water was supplied via this culvert because research facilities required a large amount of water.

This facility stood to blend in perfectly with the throng of warehouses that received ship cargo.

Some called it the National Defense Research Institute, a name that suggested Aureatia actually had such an institution...and one that didn't sound strange to any private citizen who happened to hear it off-handedly.

The frequent and massive cargo shipments coming and going from the facility didn't even seem unnatural. No one had a complete grasp of each piece of cargo that traveled in and out of the warehouse district every day in vast amounts. Through bribes and under-the-table negotiations, shadier shipment also *escaped* the eyes of officials who performed inspections of all cargo loaded and unloaded from ships and the officials who conducted on-site inspections of the facility.

Since the beginning of the Sixways Exhibition, the facility had been growing even livelier.

That day, there was more fresh cargo being brought in.

"This here's what I told you about before, the latest golem model from Kiyazuna."

The middle-aged woman standing next to the freight car was named Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam. Her almost completely white hair was tied behind her, and her expression left not so much a jovial, but an overly familiar, impression.

On the surface, she was Aureatia's Twenty-First General. Even as she held this position, she would frequently visit this illegal research facility.

"Called 'Craft Golems,' apparently. Their legs are real shabby, but apparently, you can load 'em up with resources and they'll fly. Probably have to spin this metal propeller here and it'll lift off. What's that tiny propeller attached to the end of its tail?"

"Negates the couple of forces." An answer came from a corner of the workshop.

An elderly zmeu. With his completely black skin and massive muscular frame, they were different from the common zmeu, and their lizard-like appearance more resembled a crocodile instead.

"By rotating that huge propeller, the reaction will include a couple of forces on its frame side that will make it spin in the opposite direction. That's why it spins another, propelled to negate the couple of forces."

"Whew, you really do know your stuff, don't you, Mr. Sindikar?"

"This doesn't even concern aerodynamics. It's mere rudimentary physics. Deplorable..."

With steady footsteps, the zmeu named Sindikar approached the Craft Golem and put a hand to its frame.

"Real solid. Hard to believe it can fly with this much weight."

"It's one of Kiyazuna's golems after all. Either it's been given the ability to use Force Arts to support its flight, or she slotted a magic tool inside somewhere that'll do the job. Want to take it apart and check?"

"*Hmph*. Will you be able to put it back together?"

"*Hee-hee!* Constructs are a total mystery to me!"

Tuturi shrugged her shoulders. Sindikar the Ark was a crotchety old reptile, but within the National Defense Research Institute, he was still one of the easier ones to get along with, even among the other minian races present.

"Originally...we were supposed to foray into the skies without relying on this unnatural power. As long as they have proper wings and proper propulsion, even leather shoes can fly through the air. It's already been almost forty years since we've come to know this, and yet the minian races... They haven't claimed the skies for their own yet."

"I get it. The automobile's finally started to catch on, but flying

machines are a whole other deal. No one's coughing up the money for them."

Minia of the Beyond were said to have gained complete control over the limitless skies long ago. Not only did they construct a transportation network using flying machines that could travel freely and at fast speeds, but they even went one step further, escaping their planet's gravity and traveling to space.

The history of this world was different. In the past, the wyverns—far greater in number than they were presently—had obstructed the path into the skies.

The wyvern's numbers had plummeted once the terror of the True Demon King spread. In exchange, the war coffers that funded the never-ending upheaval were prioritized over funds for developing flight.

"That's why Lithia was a threat. If we had looked to the theories of our predecessors...assembled a production system and organized an air force to utilize said flying machines...Aureatia would've never fallen behind some weak wyvern soldiers!"

"Yup, yup, I get it. I've heard enough griping about Aureatia, thanks! Flying machines really would be awesome, though... Well, what are we going to do about the Craft Golem? I didn't bring it all the way here outta the goodness of my heart, okay?"

"...I want to test-drive it. While I'm sure its movements will be different from a theoretical flying machine, if we can move just once, then I can add my own Force Arts to the mix. What's important is that it'll fly and that it'll shoot. That's it."

"Gonna have to grab a nice big open space away from the eyes of others, then. Think you'll make it in time for the ninth match?"

"Won't know anything until I can prove it. That said..."

Sindikar put one hand on the object next to the Craft Golem—the long and large machine-gun barrel that he had been preparing this whole time.

"If we can shove the Lightning Flute here right above it, it could take on a dragon and win just fine."

The self-proclaimed demon king, Sindikar the Ark.

Theory-based, completely free flight control. Able to also make shells accelerate to super-fast speeds, he was the greatest Force Arts user among all the minian races.

A hue of madness flickered in his pupils. Despite being hindered by the ravages of time, despite being treated as a self-proclaimed

demon king... his conviction to single-mindedly pursue the unknown skies was another name for madness.

I'm jealous, really.

Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam didn't possess such passions.

Thus, she felt envious of people like him and ended up driving them away, watching coldly from afar.



Quewai the Moon Fragment didn't have any conviction at all.

He often wondered if his promotion to the Twenty-Nine Officials had been a mistake.

With an innate disadvantage, he had understood that he would never become a leader in command of an organization. While there were some who could break out of their shell with wits and hard work, Quewai, at least, didn't seem able to. In all fairness, he never intended to.

He could, however, quickly solve any complicated calculation problems that he was given, and he could perfectly remember people he had seen or writing he had read with just a single look. He thought that these abilities were the skills treasured in a local bureaucrat, though, and different from the sort of talents that the Twenty-Nine Officials possessed.

Despite all of that, he was in his current position because he had no beliefs or convictions.

When he was endorsed to become the Eighteenth Minister, he remembered feeling that he didn't care either way.

At the time, he knew several of the rumors regarding Iriolde the Atypical Tome, but when Quewai had been invited to join his camp, he had thought, once again, that he didn't care either way.

The decision would be made immediately. In the end, each side didn't differ much from each other.

Political judgments—the tangled, complex thoughts of the people—surpassed the processing capacity of Quewai's brain. He thought it was ultimately the same whether someone like him and his brain came up with an answer or immediately if he chose one of the options on a fifty-fifty chance.

He was far more suited to working with simple numbers and words and leaving such troubles to busybodies like Tuturi.

“Quewai. It’s absolutely gorgeous. Have a look.”

“Sure.” With a flat reply, Quewai looked down on the man writhing on the ground.

Inside the massive greenhouse, the earth was exposed in a sort of indoor plantation. He was rolling around in the dirt, unconcerned about the eyes of others, thus the young man’s white robe was in a hideous state. His free-growing mess of hair was tangling with the grass.

Nevertheless, the man wasn’t writhing in agony from any sort of sickness...though he may have been sick in a certain sense of the word.

“I-it’s just, just sooo beauuutiful! A whole world is here! A circle of life and death! Cyclical harmony embodied as a perfect natural and symbolic work of art! Not only that, but this colony even has an inherent will of its own! Do you understand, Minister Quewai?!”

“Yukis, can you stop kicking up dirt everywhere?”

“Ah, ah, pardon me! This success is such sheer and evocative beauty, my mind has no spare room to control myself! I can’t help but get this way; it’s a natural physical reaction! Apologies!”

The flora that had filled the massive greenhouse up until two days prior had, as far as Quewai could see, almost completely withered away.

Yukis pointed to a group of organisms sitting in the center of the desiccated plants.

It was a fungal sporocarp, diverse and strangely shaped. One had a stalk that stretched taller than a minia. Another had a cap that looked like boiling bubbles. A third gave off a vivid light, even at midday.

“Yukis, was there any meaning behind this experiment of yours? It seems to me that after gathering all those beastfolk carcasses and valuable materials, all you’ve done is grown some rare mushrooms.”

“Of course! Yes, yes, of course, indubitably! I firmly believe this success will prove meaningful for all mankind! Yes, yes, I need to give it a second name! Right away! Nectegio has already developed self-consciousness, theoretically speaking! Ooooooh, R-Ravenous Rot! Minister Quewai, how does Nectegio the Ravenous Rot sound to you?!”

This organism had apparently been named Nectegio the

Ravenous Rot.

Neither a revenant, nor skeleton, nor golem. It was a new species of construct, first realized in practical applications by Yukis, called a fungus.

"I don't really care, but Yukis, if you can't provide a plentiful number of constructs the National Defense Research Institute will be forced to cut off your funding. The specific requirements were controllable constructs that equaled the fighting power of two thousand soldiers—can I assume this won't be a problem?"

"Ohh—ah, ah, yes, I can amass a *simple* force of arms quite quickly."

Yukis swayed as he stood up. His mouth was twisted up like a crescent moon.

"Have you looked at the laboratory next door? Two thousand? With the resources you've supplied me, six thousand will be harvestable by the scheduled date. Though they will be the same fungus soldiers I've previously shown you, and only able to understand simple charging orders."

The self-proclaimed demon king, Yukis the Ground Colony. Now, with Izick the Chromatic dead, the only Life Arts users capable of individually producing a military force were Krafnir the Hatch of Truth and Yukis the Ground Colony.

"Oh! Putting that aside, Minister Quewai, *hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!* Will you dance with me to celebrate Nectegio's completion?! Today is a truly joyous occasion! Beautiful... I can't help breaking into a smile! My decreased blood pressure from the sinus tachycardia might just kill me!"

Yukis resembled a creepy new species of organism himself, not so much dancing, but bizarrely jumping around like a frog.

Quewai could do nothing more than stare at him with an ice-cold glare. It wasn't out of any sense of malice, but because he truly couldn't see the meaning behind this abnormal behavior.

Well, we've gotten all the military strength together. We're really going to overthrow Aureatia after all, aren't we?

Neither uplifted nor resigned, he thought over this fact with indifference.

He didn't dwell on whether the act of supporting such illegal research and scheming to rebel against Aureatia was correct or not, and merely simplified it into which side would win out and survive. Quewai's choice to join Iriolde's camp in the first place stemmed

from little more than his decision that this side had a higher chance of coming out on top.

Six thousand fungus soldiers in addition to the breakaway military forces led by Haade. It was more than enough of a fighting force to topple the expected troop strength of Rosclay's reformation faction.

They hadn't been unable to make any moves. They simply hadn't made any.

They had foreseen that, eventually, a situation would arise that necessitated Aureatia to commit its collective efforts to meet. Then, with Alus the Star Runner's attack, they were able to grasp onto the bottom of Aureatia's response capabilities.

Iriolde's group was different from Alus the Star Runner, who also had been propelled by a rampaging magic tool to attack the city. They were a military force that possessed reason, who could target and attack Aureatia's power center, regardless of how many hero candidates the city commanded, how many enchanted swords and magic tool trump cards they maintained, and how much faster they could prepare these methods of defense.

The day it all goes into motion is drawing closer.

Given that they had begun to move after biding their time for so long, they would likely make things progress quickly.

This was a very simple fact that even Quewai could understand.



The ruins of a shop from the era of the Central Kingdom, the kind set up in the small gaps of the intricate old town area. In one of the living quarters' rooms, Enu the Distant Mirror was waiting for nightfall.

A man with unusual facial features, having a gentlemanly appearance, yet with his eyes always opened wide as saucers.

The sponsor of Zeljirga the Abyss Web, and Aureatia's Thirteenth Minister.

At least, as of that moment, these titles of his hadn't changed at all.

"While they haven't put out a search warrant for me, Aureatia is likely trying to capture me in secret. Even if they weren't, since one of the sponsors went missing right before the start of the eighth

match, they're bound to suspect something." Enu was murmuring as if he was convinced that there was some other person in the faint darkness.

His demeanor belied the trademark skittishness and nervousness of a fugitive.

"...Given your position, you must have considered obstructing my movements from here on out. There's not much time left. Personally, if you're going to dispose of me, it'd probably be best to do it sooner rather than later."

The invisible army, weaving a web of intrigue in the shadows of the Sixways Exhibition, and who upset both the sixth and eighth matches.

Their true identity was the spy guild consisting of a vampire and corpses, Obsidian Eyes. Enu the Distant Mirror, originally supposed to be in the position of hunting down and eradicating vampires, was betraying Aureatia *of his own volition* and scheming to use this guild for his own purposes.

"....."

There was the sound of something, like a small pebble, hitting the window.

"Looks like they found me."

The next instant, the door on the opposite side of the room was kicked in.

A large number of shadows came flooding into the room and encircled Enu.

Armed Aureatia soldiers. They didn't make any pointless conversation, pointing their bows and spearpoints straight at the man.

Enu didn't even attempt to stand from his seat. He had a certain degree of fighting knowledge himself, but it was a given that he had no hope of winning against a full squad of trained Aureatia soldiers.

"Master Enu the Distant Mirror. We ask you to come with us."

"I don't mind, really. What am I suspected of, exactly?"

"We're questioning you regarding the large-scale corpse outbreak at the castle garden theater."

"Quite a heavy response for just some questioning..." Enu commented, his eyes still wide open and without any hint of a smile.

He didn't know how much these soldiers knew, but given the size of the squad put together, they must have realized that they

weren't up against a mere civil official on the lam.

Diligently keeping their guard up against the possibility of another enemy lying in wait, they encircled him, likely to ensure that they could immediately slay Enu the instant any one of them were killed.

However, they were still too lax.

"Hey. What's with your voice?"

The soldier realized there was a faint static mixed in with the voice Enu was emitting.

That instant, Enu's body exploded. The force of the explosive flame, nearly enough to demolish the entire stone shop ruins, scorched all the soldiers to the bone.

On top of a slightly elevated hill, Enu visually confirmed the black smoke rising from a gap in the old town.

"It appears you handle golems differently from Kiyazuna the Axle. Are you skilled at making dolls, then?"

"To some extent, as is so for any Craft Arts user. Kiyazuna has no fondness for minian-shaped golems. Or perhaps there was a time when I thought this distaste for the minian shape was a weakness."

The old man standing next to Enu picked up the hat that had blown off in the wind a moment prior. It seemed in part to be the blast wave, reaching all the way up to the top of the hill, but it could have been nothing more than a breeze.

Enu disconnected the small radzio in his other hand. While it was a relatively simple plan, they had needed to convince the soldiers, even if only for a moment, that Enu himself was the one talking.

"That squad surely reported back about finding you before they entered, Master Enu. If this will give them the impression that you died in the explosion with them, then it was worth making that doll."

"I see. So, I still have some value to you then, do I, Miluzi?"

The elderly gentleman's name was Miluzi the Coffin Edict. He was a self-proclaimed demon king who faced off against Kiyazuna the Axle during Mestelxil's combat test prior to the Particle Storm assault. In the past, he had been called the most skilled golem maker after Kiyazuna.

Enu was a collaborator with Obsidian Eyes, but he hadn't completely earned their trust, either. Currently, with all the original

agents in hiding, Miluzi had been tasked with keeping an eye on Enu.

“Or rather... It’s less that I’m valuable, and more that there’s value in keeping me around as a connection with the National Defense Research Institute. Even for Obsidian Eyes, probing into the secrets of the Institute is not the sort of work that can be done by turning a few people into corpses... Much the same as it is for Aureatia’s core government, yes?”

“I’m merely doing what I’ve been ordered to do. You are free to make use of us as you have up until now.”

“Us,” is it?

Miluzi looked perfectly normal. However, in truth, he was yet another corpse of Obsidian Eyes.

Linaris the Obsidian, with her well-developed abilities of vampiric control, possessed a nigh-godly level of mental manipulation, as if she had dissected all the cells in her victims’ heads, and rebuilt them from the ground up in a completely different form.

She’s even changed someone who was once an enemy like Miluzi into a pawn that acts according to her will... On the other hand, the assassins who had always been with the guild had sworn sincere fealty to Linaris. To possess such a diverse ability to control others, and to combine it all to such a high standard... Linaris. I’ve never seen someone like you.

It was precisely why he wanted this power. To build a new world.

“Hello there, sorry to keep you waiting, Enu the Distant Mirror.”

Someone appeared behind them on the hill.

A dingy middle-aged man, seeming to fit the word “vagrant” to a T.

“Errrm, the other one’s got to be Miluzi the Coffin Edict, right? I was already given the rundown. I’m super glad we have someone of your skills willing to join our ranks.”

“You’re too kind. May I assume you are Acromdo the Variety, then?”

“Acromdo, you look a good amount different from when we first met.”

“...Really? So a minia looks to appearances for proof that it’s the same person. Welp, that’s a problem. I have the pass stamp to

get into the National Research Defense Institute, but this doesn't really have anything to do with my identity, does it?"

This vagabond by the name of Acromdo put a hand to his chin and began to ponder. Enu commented to him. "Not that. It's your gait. It seems your mimicry still needs some work before it's complete."

"I'm being careful about how I walk. Truly..."

Acromdo forced a smile.

Much as he was doing now, making contact with Enu while dodging the watchful eyes of the various powers at play, Acromdo was a brilliant liaison, able to take on various outward appearances and social statuses. However, after witnessing the spy methods of Obsidian Eyes, the flaws stood out. Perhaps it was merely one of the drawbacks of a *new weapon*.

"Hmph. Though walking isn't your job anyway. I expect great things."

"That's true. Enu, you'll be doing some work for us from here on out, right? That means we can become friends."

Thirteenth Minister Enu was seen as an eccentric man, extremely competent, yet without any ambitions to speak of.

However, as he faithfully helmed Aureatia's development planning, he built the basepoint for Iriolde's camp in this city. As he undertook operations to exterminate vampires, he was now providing samples of the rare creatures to the National Defense Research Institute. He also took advantage of the Sixways Exhibition match to have Obsidian Eyes and Aureatia act to remove an uncertain variable in the form of Kaete's camp.

Betraying Aureatia, and with Obsidian Eyes having control over whether he lived or died, no matter what might happen going forward, he was propelled by his wish to see what lay beyond it all. A secure, regulated world without discord or war.

Though it may have taken a different shape, just like his previous opponent Kaete the Round Table, this was a clear hope for the future.

"Let's go, Miluzi. We're meeting up with the National Defense Research Institute."

"Of course. I certainly can't wait to see what lies ahead."

There existed an organization known as the National Defense Research Institute.

While their name was prefixed with the word "National

Defense,” the Aureatia government hadn’t officially authorized any such organization.

Their objective was neither national defense, nor research.

The name was a kind of cipher. It referred to an institution that gathered monstrous players from behind the scenes who had never appeared on the center stage, all to overthrow Aureatia.

The scale of Iriolde the Atypical Tome’s camp was truly nothing short of actual military force all its own.

Four of Aureatia’s Twenty-Nine Officials.

Haade the Flashpoint. Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam. Quewai the Moon Fragment. Enu the Distant Mirror.

Two kinds of biological weapons.

Acromdo the Variety. Nectegio the Ravenous Rot.

Four self-proclaimed demon kings.

Viga the Clamor. Sindikar the Ark. Yukis the Ground Colony. Miluzi the Coffin Edict.

Powerful individuals lived in this world.

They might put on a magnificent and heroic fight to the death...done under equal terms, the kind that exhausted all possible power at their disposal, infusing the onlooking audience with passion and zeal.

This was one of the forms taken by battles between the strong.

It went without saying, but this was not the case for the Sixways Exhibition.

If said contest genuinely decided life or death, then the eyes of an audience didn’t intervene.

This was a battle of true duels, exhausting all forms of power and intelligence, dexterity and strategy, tyranny and politics.

Among the four matches that were about to begin, *not a single one among them* was conducted in a normal manner.

The second round would become, across the entire span of the Sixways Exhibition, the battle that would claim the most lives.

All eight matches of the first round were over, and Alus the Star Runner, who had come to attack Aureatia at the same time, had been brought down after an all-out war was fought against him.

The meeting among Rosclay's camp to determine their strategic policy going forward was, like the previous one, conducted in absolute secrecy within one of the ordinary meeting rooms inside the civilian town hall.

"Sorry for worrying you all. Why don't we begin?"

Rosclay the Absolute made a perfectly symmetrical smile.

The intensive Life Arts treatments proved worthwhile, as he had recovered enough to walk on his own legs and attend the meeting himself, but not enough to fight at his full strength.

On the surface, the large amount of time placed between the end of all the first-round matches and the beginning of the ninth was ostensibly to clean up the damage from the self-proclaimed demon king Alus's attack and to quarantine and respond to the vampire threat. However, it also bore the implication of buying Rosclay the Absolute time to recover to his full strength before he fought again in the tenth match.

"...Nophtok doesn't seem to be coming," a bald elderly man murmured with displeasure.

Chief medical adviser to the royal family and the one in charge of Life Arts, Ekirehji the Blood Fountain.

"I mean, Nophtok's basically dead, right? Also, really, the meeting's gonna go pretty much the same whether he's here or not."

The snaggle-toothed man with slender arms and legs was Ninth Minister Yaniegiz. Though not tasked with actual Word Arts backup, he acted as Rosclay's adjutant.

Normally, an elderly man, Nophtok the Crepuscule Bell, would be here as well. Aureatia's Eleventh Minister, given control Order, was in charge of keeping an eye on and controlling his sponsored hero candidate, Kuze the Passing Disaster. Now, having lost his mind, Nophtok was essentially taken captive by the Free City of

Okafu and transported somewhere, with his safety uncertain.

“Can’t we beat down Okafu...under the charges of abducting and imprisoning Nophtok? All their economic activity’s been frozen, successfully fragmenting their forces, right? There’s no reason to keep protecting our agreement with such foolish honesty... We should just crush them while we can.”

“Right now, we can’t mobilize the military,” Third Minister, Jelky the Swift Ink, replied.

Wearing thin spectacles, he was a sharp and cold-blooded bureaucrat.

“Yukiharu the Twilight Diver has secured evidence that Nophtok was the one who ordered the attack on the church in the Western Outer Ward.”

Nophtok the Crepuscule Bell had moved immediately to wipe Kuze the Passing Disaster off the Sixways Exhibition playing field. The plan was to incite the Sun’s Conifer to raid an Order almshouse and secure hostages that would hold sway over Kuze, but this scheme failed, and the visitor reporter, Yukiharu the Twilight Diver, had taken photographic evidence of the incident.

“I believe the fact they openly came to take custody of Nophtok is a declaration that if we should move to recover him or suspend Kuze’s qualifications to participate, they can easily reveal the circumstances of the incident to the public.”

“They’ll judge that all the unlawful behavior was done under Nophtok’s own discretion. It’s not a major problem, Jelky...”

“The capture of Okafu does not hold as much priority as it did previously. As Advisor Ekirehji says, Okafu’s source of income, mercenary work, is currently suspended, and their city’s income is entirely dependent on the Gray-Haired Child’s personal coffers. In regard to the Free City of Okafu... I see that as long as we maintain this current situation, their nation’s treasury will eventually be exhausted.”

The moment that Okafu was forced to accept the suspension of their mercenary operations as a condition of Zigita Zogi the Thousandth’s participation in the games, the conquering of the Free City of Okafu was, for all intents and purposes, complete—at the very least, they would be economically neutralized before the Sixways Exhibition.

The Gray-Haired Child’s foothold for his invasion of Aureatia, Zigita Zogi, had been defeated as well.

“Furthermore, large-scale action under the present circumstances is inadvisable. Haade the Flashpoint. Iriolde the Atypical Tome. The invisible army. Kiyazuna the Axle. The Old Kingdoms’ loyalists... I estimate an extremely high probability that any of these forces may aim for this opportunity, with our political function to take action dealt a massive blow by Alus the Star Runner’s attack. We need to continue exhausting all our efforts on defending Aureatia, or our defeat will be inevitable.”

Listening to Jelky’s prognosis, Yaniegiz shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

“*Heh-heh!* Sheesh, after going to all the trouble of crushing Lithia and Toghie City to stop this sort of thing from happening once the Sixways Exhibition began, too... No matter how hard we try, nothing goes perfectly, does it? Awful, isn’t it?”

Jelky glanced sidelong at Yaniegiz for his comment before returning his sights to Ekirehjy.

“This is why there won’t be any attack on Okafu. In fact, it would be better if we used Nophtok as a bargaining chip to preserve the chance of drawing Kuze or Ozonezma to our side.”

“...Hmph. Awfully callous to treat a comrade-in-arms like that.”

“Lord Rosclay. There’s also something I’d like to confirm about our plan going forward, if possible.”

A monocled old man raised his hand. A first-rate Craft Arts instructor at Iznock Royal High School, Ownopellal the Bone Watcher—the one in charge of providing Craft Arts support in Rosclay’s battles.

“In the ninth match, Lucnoca the Winter will be fighting against Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation. Needless to say, if the match takes its natural course, it will mean that the semifinal will be Lord Rosclay versus Lucnoca. I assume you’re aware that with that annihilating breath of hers...it will be somewhat unrealistic to designate her a self-proclaimed demon king and crush her with Aureatia’s combined forces, as we did with Alus.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

“Hm. In which case, that would mean the upcoming ninth match will be the only opportunity to invest an extensive amount of fighting power toward talking Lucnoca down while ensuring you don’t end up fighting yourself...”

Lucnoca the Winter was said to be a nightmarish threat to all existence, but the fact that she would only appear on the day of her

match was another big problem when it came to dealing with her.

She would make her next visit to the Mali Wastes only during the ninth match, and the rest of the time she lurked in the far-off Igania Ice Lake. No one in the world could possibly defeat Lucnoca the Winter while she was isolated by such an incredible distance.

Thus, if there was the smallest chance that Rosclay would be able to advance in the tournament without fighting Lucnoca, their only option was to utilize the opportunity provided by the ninth match to set up an all-out attack with all of the fighting strength they had at their disposal.

“While you may already be taking action, Lord Rosclay, it would be a bit strange if you weren’t reaching out to any of us about it. I assume it will be an extremely large-scale undertaking, and if you’ve already decided on a course of action, the earlier you could fill us in on the details, the easier it will be for us to act.”

“I can answer that for you.”

Glistening blond hair and red eyes.

Rosclay’s smile was always perfect and natural, like the lead actor of an opera.

“We will not make any attack against Lucnoca the Winter.”

“What?!”

Ownopellal’s eyes widened, hidden behind his thick eyebrows. He must have questioned if he hadn’t misheard Rosclay.

“As Jelky just explained, the current situation makes it difficult to dispatch military forces against a threat outside of Aureatia. Our plan is to let the opportunity to attack Lucnoca the Winter during the ninth match go by—and during the thirteenth match, when I battle against Lucnoca in the semifinals, reevaluate our strategy then.”

“But. But...we’re not going to have enough time. If we act during the ninth match, we might be able to pin the suspicions of foul play on Psianop, but...if we take a large-scale military action on the day of your match, won’t it be difficult to smooth things over in the eyes of the population? Are you sure?”

“I have my own idea on how to handle things; however, I cannot give you the full answer here.”

Rosclay quietly looked over the faces of the people gathered in the meeting.

Jelky the Swift Ink. Yaniegiz the Chisel. Ekirehgy the Blood Fountain. Ownopellal the Bone Watcher.

Antel the Alignment and Viga the Clamor were absent.

“...as we cannot clear away suspicions that there is an informant within our ranks.”

“.....!”

“According to information we received just the other day...we now know that the former Fifth Minister Iriolde is commanding several powers involved with the Sixways Exhibition from the shadows. Naturally, we were wary beforehand and already took steps to thwart him—however, I cannot deny that one possible factor for why we haven’t been able to get a complete grasp on his forces’ movements until now could be because our investigative information was being leaked to them.”

“...It’s Viga, then, isn’t it?” Ekirehjy the Blood Fountain said with his arms crossed. “That woman’s the only one who hasn’t been here for all three meetings. That, and...while it hasn’t been disclosed publicly, she’s a former self-proclaimed demon king. She has plenty of motive for aligning herself with Iriolde’s opposition force.”

“That is also part of the ongoing investigation. As such, please consider the concealment of any details on the plans to slay Lucnoca as nothing more than a way to deal with a hypothetical worst-case scenario.”

“...An unwitting informant is another big possibility to consider.”

Ownopellal the Bone Watcher also had a concerned look on his face, a shadow lurking in his normally easygoing demeanor.

“A close acquaintance could very well be an agent for Lord Iriolde. We certainly want to take extra care not to divulge any information to others, regardless of how important it may be.”

“We’ll take a wait-and-see approach with the ninth match. If there are any changes, everyone will be notified immediately.”

Under normal circumstances, Rosclay’s tactics would be judged as a postponement strategy that gave him no hopes of victory.

Nevertheless, as long as Rosclay outlined it with his own words, filled with confidence, he was able to make those with ability and authority, like those gathered at the meeting, believe that he *had something up his sleeve*. Even if all that lay ahead was a precipice into the abyss, he made them interpret it to mean he had some idea after all.

“Mr. Ekirehjy, the next topic, please.”

“Well, I’d like to get your opinion on something regarding the royal family’s team of doctors’ measures to prevent vampire infection. Given the present difficulties in refining a new antiserum, as a preventive measure for the time being, we’ve...”

The meeting resumed.

Seeing as there existed no measures to exterminate Lucnoca the Winter, Rosclay would likely end up having to fight her at some point.

When the Sixways Exhibition began and the matchups had been determined, First Minister Grasse evaluated it as so...

...Rosclay the Absolute had failed. He had lost the political battle and was forced into an unwinnable fight.

Currently, Tuturi and the others were standing a very short distance in front of Igania Ice Lake. They hadn't actually entered the uncharted land of extreme cold, though they weren't entirely sure of that.

An intensely frigid and biting air temperature that seemed to reject life itself. The silvery white landscape as far as the eye could see totally prevented her from feeling the border between earth and lake.

The Igania Ice Lake was said to be covered in ice so solid and thick that there were records of giants safely walking on it in the past. It wasn't going too far to say the lake itself had been reshaped by the ice into solid land.

On top of it all, this climate had been molded by a single dragon.

Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam now needed to negotiate with that very dragon. Quewai the Moon Fragment standing behind her seemed to be enduring the cold himself, burying his neck underneath his scarf.

"Still not scared, even at a time like this?"

"I mean, I'm still terrified right now."

When the two of them had nominated themselves to directly negotiate as Lucnoca the Winter's acting sponsor, no one had raised a single objection to the point that even their opposing faction, Rosclay's camp, approved of the idea.

Lucnoca was simply too dangerous of a creature to deal with. Tuturi understood that herself.

However, since Harghent was no longer able to fulfill his role as sponsor after shooting down Alus the Star Runner...someone among the Twenty-Nine Officials needed to directly inform Lucnoca of this fact and get her to accept the change.

...Of course, even if Harghent was in perfectly good health, no one could've left him to handle it anyway.

Ever since Alus's attack, Harghent had become a people's champion, slayer of the self-proclaimed demon king, but from

Aureatia's perspective, it had merely grown more evident that he was someone who couldn't keep himself from going out of control.

If Harghent continued to be in charge of negotiating with Lucnoca for the ninth match, a temporary fit of madness could very well cause Aureatia to be destroyed. A ridiculous and terrible end.

While Tuturi gripped the heated stone inside her thick coat, Quewai skillfully started a fire and sent up red smoke from a fuming agent up into the sky. As long as it wasn't snowing, it would serve as a marker for over a day, but this too all depended on if Lucnoca was out and about, noticed their signal, and was in the mood to chat.

Until then, they needed to continue waiting there, no matter how long it took. It was possible that a whole day wouldn't be enough, and they could end up waiting two to three days. They prepared a bivouac for the longer end of the estimates—six days, a whole big moon's time.

"Sure hope we can just camp out in this freezing hellhole for six days and that'll be the end of it."

"Except if that does happen, our entire trip out here would be a waste of time."

"Isn't that better, though? If six whole days go by and Lucnoca doesn't show any interest in our signal...that'll mean she's gotten her fun out of the Sixways Exhibition and isn't even motivated to appear in the next match."

"However, Lucnoca's own intentions are what will determine if she swoops down on the day or not."

"The strong really are the goddamn worst..."

Tuturi cursed while she pounded the tent pegs into the ground.

He was right. No matter what they presented to her, no matter what they made her promise, Lucnoca the Winter could overrule absolutely all of it on the slightest whim. Should Tuturi and Quewai's negotiations indeed prove successful, they would still only receive a verbal promise that wouldn't serve as reliable insurance of Aureatia's survival.

Intrinsically, the danger outweighed the benefit. There was no safe way of dealing with her besides killing her.

There lay the reason why Rosclay's camp wasn't present. On an even more fundamental level, it was also the reason no one besides Harghent had sponsored Lucnoca's participation.

"What Lucnoca the Winter wants above all else is an all-out

battle, taking on the strongest opponents around. As long as we know what she yearns for, there's still some room for conversation. We have to be in a better position than Harghent was when he convinced her without anything to go off of."

She had to believe as much, or she couldn't possibly keep going.

Ignoring that there were no guarantees either way, whether they eventually snuffed Lucnoca out, or tried to use her for themselves, taking over the position of her sponsor could give them a large initiative against the other camps. Her fighting strength alone would become a deterrent against Rosclay's camp—though that, too, all depended on how Tuturi's negotiations played out.

"Well, we said we'd do it and all. Gimme a break..."

"Tuturi." Quewai had been sitting in front of the fire, not lifting a finger to help make camp, when he looked far off into the sky and murmured. "That, up there..."

A dragon.

A graceful and massive silhouette, plainly different from that of a wyvern even from afar.

Both of them gulped at the magnificent figure, hazy in the sky. For both Tuturi and Quewai, this was their first time laying eyes on a real dragon.

As it approached, her gorgeous white scales became vividly clear each time her figure slipped out from the thin layer of clouds.

It was too quiet to even feel terror, so grand it made it hard to move a muscle.

The embodiment of another world's season of death—winter.

There was simply no other word to describe it.

Such was Lucnoca the Winter.

"Oh, where's Harghent?" the strongest of dragons said, landing on the ground of ice without making a sound. "I thought that sending up a red smoke meant Harghent had some news for me."

"...Th—"

It wasn't that her throat had frozen over.

It certainly wasn't that she couldn't find the words. Tuturi always remained more flippant than any other.

However, even knowing full well that only death awaited her if she didn't say anything, her words wouldn't come out.

She couldn't verbalize her thoughts. It might have been reverence toward the fact *that a creature like this even existed*. A perfect life-form who made the minian races seem like poorly made

works of clay stood right before her eyes.

Perhaps it was this race, this single dragon specimen, who was originally meant to reign over the land.

The fact she didn't began to feel like a terrible embarrassment, even a mistake.

They hadn't even had a proper conversation. Tranquil, glass-like eyes were merely staring at her.

How...?

Tuturi's thoughts were in disarray. The sentiment she finally managed to string into words was a minuscule one.

...How...was he able to stay calm when face to face with something like this?

There had been several champions passed down through the ages who were said to have challenged Lucnoca the Winter and perished.

That same Harghent the Still had also hired the services of a no-name mercenary and challenged this very dragon.

He was clearly and obviously out of his mind.

"Wellll? I won't know anything if you don't talk to me. *Uhoo-hoo-hoo.*"

"U-um... Th-there is something we wish to tell you about H-Harghent."

Tuturi wondered what exactly Quewai was feeling behind her.

She thought he was an indifferent, spoiled, and horrid man, but perhaps he might have been able to empathize a bit with the awe and dread Tuturi was currently feeling.

"...My name is...Tuturi the Violet Foam. A g-great disaster...hit Aureatia...and Harghent got caught in it and was heavily wounded."

"Oh my, that's awful," Lucnoca replied, her voice sounding truly concerned. "He isn't dead, is he? Minia are so quick to die, so you really should heal him with care... That's too bad, really. Harghent was such an interesting little minian, too."

What the hell...was Harghent supposed to be? That man really...

Hopelessly incompetent, weak-willed, fanciful, only ever acting in ways no one wanted.

That same man had managed to have an actual proper conversation with this godlike creature?

"A-as for the effects...from this disaster...the Sixways Exhibition has been p-put on hold. We c-can't prepare the

opportunity for a m-match...you were promised.”

She knew for herself that she had omitted parts of their previously planned explanation in various places, and that her speech had become terribly clumsy.

Was this really okay? It couldn't possibly be.

Her words, her thoughts, her existence—absolutely everything.

Still...Lucnoca the Winter shouldn't know anything about Aureatia's current situation. She hasn't the faintest interest in minian civilization. She has no grounds to deny that the Sixways Exhibition itself has been canceled...

“That's a lie, isn't it?”

A chill.

Tuturi could only hear Lucnoca's words, mixed with light laughter, as a firmly confident denial.

Even in the piercing frigid air, a viscous sweat poured out from Tuturi's skin.

“Tuturi? It's not very nice to tease an old granny like that, you know? Why, I might slip up and believe you were telling the truth! *Uhoo-hoo-hoo-hoo.*”

“...!”

Tuturi stood, unable to deny her claim or ask her how she knew.

Had Tuturi's tone or demeanor made Lucnoca able to see through the farce? Had she been able to use logical reasoning to arrive at the answer? Or perhaps it was neither, and she knew absolutely everything with some unimaginable degree of intuition.

“Please forgive us for the jest,” said Quewai, who answered behind Tuturi.

Stop.

“The match is eight days from now. It will begin right as the sun sets.”

It was one of the worst possible outcomes for their negotiations. With this, Lucnoca the Winter was guaranteed to appear at the ninth match. Yet, despite it, Tuturi found herself inwardly grateful for Quewai.

Lucnoca the Winter... Was she really this much...of a monster?

Lucnoca the Winter hadn't done anything. She had merely appeared, and they had exchanged a short conversation.

Far beyond it, she might have been trying her best to be amicable and interact with them by minian standards as much as

possible. This only made her seem even more terrifying.

“You’re going to become my sponsor?”

Tuturi didn’t know which of them her pale blue eyes were looking at, but Quewai was the one who nodded.

“And you are?”

“...Quewai the Moon Fragment.”

“That’s all I need to hear. I’ll make for the Mali Wastes in eight days, before sunset. For Harghent...please give him my regards. Until we meet again.”

Neither of them could say a word.

It seemed that rather than continue the negotiations any further, the most valuable result of all was to *finish their negotiations with their lives*.

It felt like they were paralyzed. Even while her flapping silhouette faded and went off into the blue sky, they were unable to escape from the lingering effects of her overwhelming presence.

“...Dammit. Quewai... Why’d you tell her the day of the match?”

“Are you saying you would’ve been able to convince her, Tuturi?”

When Tuturi turned around to look at the man, Quewai’s expressionless face was drenched with a cold sweat.

“If we were both unable to eliminate her in an attack or establish a cooperative relationship, then ultimately, holding the match is the only option. Though it does merely serve to postpone the more fundamental problem.”

“Nah...”

Tuturi looked far off into the sky.

Without the figure of Lucnoca the Winter, it was nothing but a cold, quiet, and clear sky.

“...Killing Lucnoca the Winter’s the only option after all. Just having her around means that the minian races will go on living all while constantly keeping her in a good mood... No one out there wants to entertain that miserable thought.”

Tuturi thought that the only option was to kill something that couldn’t possibly be killed.

A monster almost diametrically opposed to the True Demon King—which one was truly the better option?



Far off, a makeshift hut covered in a thin layer of snow started coming into view.

They had walked quite a long distance from the Iganias lakeside, and still the biting air remained the same.

The climate didn't regain some sense of normalcy until they reached the vicinity of the closest settlement, Onuma Hamlet, but getting that far still meant crossing an entire mountain.

"...The negotiations ended safe and sound, then? Quewai's already back."

When Tuturi entered the hut, a black, crocodile-like zmeu greeted her.

The self-proclaimed demon king Sindikar was likely the only aviator of the age. It was the extraordinary effort of his long-range airlift that had carried Tuturi and Quewai, as well as the materials required to put up a bivouac to sleep in for a whole big moon's time, far out here to Iganias.

"Uh...does it look like I'm safe and sound?"

Tuturi responded to Sindikar's questions with a slightly haggard smile.

"You're still alive. That's plenty safe and sound enough."

With a surly attitude, Sindikar drank the soup from the mug in his hand.

"I was observing from afar myself. The fact that that monster didn't kill you is plenty."

"Y-you... You were watching us, Mr. Sindikar? No way."

"If I go up in the air and use a telescopic lens, there's no distance too far for me to see... Though perhaps it was only a stroke of luck she didn't notice me."

"I wonder, really. Even if Lucnoca did notice you, I seriously doubt she'd go out of her way to knock you out of the sky..."

"Yeah."

Sindikar didn't seem to hold any particular objection to Tuturi's remark, though she was seemingly disparaging the mighty self-proclaimed demon king.

"In the end, though, you managed to get in touch with her on the very first day. What a waste of time, bringing all these materials out here."

"I never knew that your airlifts could carry so much stuff. Does that Craft Golem have the same capabilities?"

"Don't be silly. I don't have a clue what sort of design

philosophy Kiyazuna the Axle had when she made that thing, but the way it's built, it's like forcing a massive piece of armor to fly. I used the mechanical parts as she had them, but by reducing its weight and streamlining its aerodynamics, I made it able to load more cargo than its original armor weight allowed..."

"Impressive."

Tuturi shrugged.

When she looked in the back of the room, Quewai was already sitting in front of the hearth after arriving back at camp ahead of Tuturi, warming up his chilled body. He didn't even greet her. A real unfriendly guy, Tuturi thought.

"Sorry to say it, Mr. Sindikar, but looks like we've got no choice but to send Lucnoca out for the ninth match. I think that'll mean you'll have to come out to the Mali Wastes, too, whether to help fight or to just observe... Think you can do it?"

"I'll cut down on the Craft Golem's load weight and redesign it to be even faster. Should take me about four days. In that case, we'll head back to Aureatia immediately."

"I mean, we can depart after Quewai finishes warming up. Not exactly a cozy little trip, but..."

Outside the window, Tuturi looked at the giant frame of the Craft Golem, covered in a giant waterproof canvas.

Securing Sindikar's cooperation to help make contact with Lucnoca hadn't simply been about minimizing the labor involved in the round trip from Aureatia to Iganian nor demonstrating the Craft Golem's capabilities.

Using still-unknown technologies to shorten what was normally an extremely long travel time meant that they could create proof that *they weren't present in Aureatia*. For this small moon's time, after the eighth match, while Tuturi and Quewai had been working in the National Defense Research Institute, they were assumed to *be absent from Aureatia* entirely.

"What do you think now, after seeing for yourself, Mr. Sindikar? Think you can shoot down a dragon?"

"..."

The artificial magic tool that Sindikar the Ark had poured all of his superb Craft Arts techniques into making, the Lightning Flute. When the situation truly drew near, they might need to rely on its attack.

"...Let me be honest. After seeing Lucnoca the Winter with my

own eyes, I lost confidence as well.”

“Figured. Same here. Made me want to turn tail and run.”

“...”

Sindikar’s rigid lips visibly twisted. Tuturi had never seen him make such an expression before, but it might have been what, for him, resembled a smile.

He had lost his nerve just as Tuturi had, and yet his expression seemed to suggest the complete opposite.

“I’m not running. I can fight for my dream.”

“Dream, huh?”

Tuturi felt as though she had come to understand something.

How had they been able to look directly at someone like Lucnoca the Winter, a being like dreams that have taken form?

The champions of the past, Harghent, and Sindikar all held them, while Tuturi had none.

I guess it must’ve been that all of those others...had an affinity for dreaming.

Qwell the Wax Flower had a large scar down her left flank. Even when she soaked in the bathtub like this, it was clearly visible through the water's surface.

It was a wound she received when she first stepped on the battlefield at sixteen. Back then, she found the scar to be disgusting and loathsome, but as time went on, her feelings had grown strange and hard to describe—sad, yet also endeared to it.

Qwell believed that the enemy who gave her this scar couldn't have been that strong. It was quite some time after the Central Kingdom had transformed into Aureatia, so the Old Kingdoms had basically become a remnant group of a lost age, which was why a new recruit like Qwell was seen as enough to handle them.

She thought that everything that happened afterward was completely her fault as well. Chasing the enemy too far, she isolated herself from her squad and ended up in a puzzling melee scrap inside a cramped building.

As if catching her by accident, an enemy's sword stabbed Qwell in the gut. Qwell desperately struggled to rip it out, but the man gripped hard on the sword hilt as if it was his sole lifeline, tearing a large lengthwise gash in her flesh as he collapsed. That was the last thing she saw before she fell into darkness.

She heard later that it was a miracle she hadn't bled out from having a main artery severed. The enemy soldier she was fighting apparently had the side of his head and his ribs shattered, dying instantly. The soldier's physique had been massive. He must have striven several times harder than any other normal minia.

While she had known that she wasn't a genuine minia, that might have been the first time she really understood it for herself.

As Psianop said, Qwell's arms were soft and slender. Coupled with her constantly quivering and fearful demeanor, she appeared less like a military officer and more like a young scholarly girl. Nevertheless, at sixteen years old, Qwell was able to beat an Old Kingdoms loyalist soldier to death.

Qwell was a dhampir. She didn't know her father's face. He had

been exterminated for being a corpse.

While the corpsification remedy had been successful for her mother, she was never allowed to remarry for the rest of her life. Her stout-hearted personality was the total opposite of Qwell's, and she laughed off what happened to Qwell's father as though it didn't bother her at all.

Qwell wanted to give any small amount of ease she could to her mother, but she wondered how her mother actually felt about her daughter, constantly using her dhampir strength to achieve martial glory—now, with her mother dead in a carriage accident, she would never know.

Qwell's image of her mother would forever be the bright and cheerful version that she had shown to the world.

...I was trying to bring peace to Aureatia for my mother, but...

When she cast her eyes down to look at her scar, the tips of her long bangs slipped into the water.

She had started hiding her eyes behind her bangs when she was seventeen to stop others from looking at her silver eyes, the telltale dhampir characteristic.

If peace truly does happen, then there won't be any more need for military officers like me.

Among the Twenty-Nine Officials, many of the military officers were superb at handling practical affairs. Some were also socialites with brilliant conversation skills who utilized capable and talented people under them.

All Qwell had was combat. She hadn't any room to learn anything else.

Psianop, trying to prove he had trained himself up to be the strongest of all despite being an ooze, could express this singular worth of hers more than any other.

That was why he needed to win.

"Lucnoca the Winter..."

Except for her left flank, no noticeable scars remained on Qwell's body.

She rubbed her hand along the pale skin of her right arm, but unlike her side, she couldn't remember in detail what sort of wounds had been carved into her skin there.

The natural gap between dhampir and other minian races was so great that no wounds, nor even the memories of them, were left behind.

Even then, Qwell had never fought an ogre one-on-one, to say nothing of a dragon.

“...Psianop can win. He can do it.”

How many times had she tried to convince herself like this?

The ultimate strength to break through the racial barriers that had cursed Qwell from birth.

She wanted to believe Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation possessed it, even if he was going up against *the* Lucnoca the Winter.

Qwell had unconsciously begun to hug her naked shoulders. She tried not to imagine anything further than that.

In a one-on-one fight, what could he even do? What would happen if he were to lose? Would there be any meaning in his death?

Psianop was Qwell's hero candidate, and a powerful fighter more worthy of respect than anyone else in the world.

Which was all the more reason why she would catch herself wishing that he wouldn't give up on the fight against Lucnoca.

If I don't believe in him, who will...?

Like the old wound carved into the Qwell—like how, back then, that muscular minia might have been able to kill Qwell—Psianop must have been able to do the same.

Her thoughts were going in circles, and she might be beginning to grow dizzy from the heat, Qwell thought.

Right as she thought to leave the bath and rose from the bathtub...

“...!”

Qwell stepped out onto the bathroom floor doing her utmost not to make any splashing sound.

She had felt the presence of someone else.

Who could it be?

It was late at night. There were no guests or merchants scheduled to visit.

Some kind of burglar or prowler, maybe? But the Sinag First Administrative District where Qwell lived was crowded with the manors of bureaucrats and nobles, and there weren't likely to be many criminals who would target an area so heavily guarded compared to other parts of Aureatia.

Whatever the case, I really wish they wouldn't come at a time like this.

She concealed the sounds she was making and opened the door to the dressing room. First, she needed to get her clothes on, and then she needed to go inform someone patrolling the main road. If Qwell handled the situation on her own, there was a chance the worst would happen, and she would accidentally kill them.

She took the towel hanging on the wall.

At nearly the exact same moment, the door opened, and a man's bony hand flew into the room.

"Ah!"

Almost entirely by reflex, Qwell wrapped the towel around the intruder's wrist. Together with a moist crack, she twisted and broke the joint in the wrist.

A well-built man. She realized too late that it likely belonged to a resident of the Sinag First Administrative District.

"Qwell...the Wax Flower."

The man's mouth twisted unsymmetrically, showing a row of teeth. Some sort of expression resembling a smile.

"Please calm down."

"H-how...how do you expect me to do that?!"

She used a low kick to sweep the man off his feet while simultaneously using the towel to pull in his right arm.

The man rotated halfway and was now standing with his back to Qwell.

With his right arm twisted behind him, the man was then pinned to the floor. It would be impossible for him to put up any resistance from this position.

"Wh-what, what is all this?! Y-you...you shouldn't sneak into someone's house, y-you know."

The feeling of shame made her protesting voice faint. Qwell was a young maiden. She also understood that, as a mutant species of vampire, she had a rather well-proportioned physical appearance.

Unless she was simply being overly self-conscious, that may have been the reason why a prowler had waited for her to be in the bath to assault her like this.

However, there was some part of her warrior's intuition that warned her this was a far bigger problem than that.

...This man's body. It's stiff.

She didn't mean that his joints weren't flexible—it just didn't have the same elasticity that minian skeletons possessed, *as a*

material.

This man had managed to easily sneak into the house of one of the Twenty-Nine Officials and get right in front of the changing room before even letting Qwell sense his presence. It was weak and alien, like that of a dead man.

"I want to be friends, Qwell the Wax Flower. What do you say...?" The man groaned. It seemed to be the sound expelled from his crushed lungs, and he didn't seem to feel any pain whatsoever from his joints being bent to their limits.

"S-sorry. No thank you."

Just by putting a bit more force on the shoulder joint to the arm twisted behind the man's back, Qwell easily broke it.

A creaking, dry sensation. The response Qwell felt in her hands had an abnormal lack of moisture.

"Hrm... You just broke it, didn't you?"

"Y-yes...?"

Just as Qwell suspected, the man showed no pain whatsoever, turning it into a vaguely humorous exchange.

At the very least, it wasn't the sort of conversation expected after a naked young girl straddled a man's back and broke his arm.

"M-make...any more funny moves...and I-I'll break your neck. Wh-what did you come here for...? Wh-who even are you?"

"Hmm... Well, you got me there. There aren't many questions I can answer. I really wanted to be friends if we could, but..."

He couldn't possibly be a vampire... A revenant. One that's been extensively remodeled at that.

Even faced with a string of abnormal situations, as long as she had time to breathe, she could judge what to do. If the enemy wasn't a minia, she needed to stop him from moving. Pushing her upper-body weight on him, she used her elbow on a point of his spine to—

"Huh?"

An unintended gasp slipped from Qwell's throat. The arm she was holding with her other hand *had come off*.

There wasn't a single drop of blood. It was so light, it didn't seem to be an actual minian body at all, just a parched and abnormal arm.

"...This worked out perfectly."

Qwell's body collapsed forward as she went to bring her elbow down.

In that instant, the man swept his left arm behind him and caressed Qwell's left flank.

"—!"

"Your nakedness worked out perfectly... No matter where I hit you, I'm guaranteed to touch skin..."

"Ah, eep, ngh!"

She felt an intense pain from the man's fingers, digging open and slipping inside her old wound.

Qwell imagined some sort of poison, but it wasn't. A more physical pain, as if a needle was being inserted, began to spread through her.

"My name is Acromdo the Variety. That's the bare minimum answer I can give you."

This...isn't good.

The fingertips of this man named Acromdo stayed attached to Qwell's side, despite the unnatural position he was twisted into, as if they were stuck to her.

In other words, once Qwell had judged the situation, she used all of her strength to kick Acromdo's left elbow. It made them put space between each other, shifting away from her straddling position over his back.

"Y-you can...still fight?"

"...Y'know, I'd like to ask that myself. Even with all that pain, you can still move like that?"

Just as Qwell had felt, the contact he made with her was intended to *make something penetrate inside of her* through his fingertips. She imagined it was either a plant's roots, or some sort of mushroom mycelia—something made to encroach deeper into her body, minutely branching off as it went, until it was impossible to rip out.

He's not a normal revenant. The inside of this Acromdo's body...has to be entirely like that. That's why the strength of his body is totally different from any minia's, and he can even detach parts of it himself...

Qwell might have gotten a more detailed understanding if she looked at how her wound was doing, but she couldn't spare any thought to it right now.

Qwell wasn't carrying anything at all. The only thing that could be called a weapon was her towel and the slight amount of water it had absorbed. Just as Acromdo had said, she couldn't let any part of her exposed bare skin be touched. These "roots" were likely to get

embedded wherever he did touch her.

She let out a deep breath. She couldn't ignore the intense pain completely. However, she could construct a fight that used movements to minimize the pain.

Qwell had done such training with Psianop.

"...Hmm, maybe I failed?" Acromdo murmured, sounding bored.

He raised his left arm.

Here it comes.

With a cracking rupturing sound, everything from his left elbow down *flew toward her*.

It was almost as fast as a bullet—however, Qwell had read her opponent's attack.

If this enemy was able to self-amputate and then freely rebuild his internal structure, it wasn't out of the question that he possessed a mechanism allowing him to extend or launch his limbs at high speeds.

I'll evade the projectile then take one step to the left. This move—

Her sight never dropped to the ground. Instead, she used the towel in her hands to sweep diagonally downward.

The sound of shattering bones. Her high-speed slash with the wet towel got a direct hit on the right arm that Acromdo had cut off.

—was something the enemy expected. His trump card was being able to move his severed arms.

"Hah-hah... You got me! I've never failed like this before. Qwell...the Wax Flower!"

"R-really, now!"

She stepped toward him—and stopped. Right before she reached him, she changed the commands she sent to her spine and tumbled outside of the changing room.

A succession of crackling explosive noises reverberated from inside.

Self-destruction. Seeing that he could send parts of his body flying to attack, there was no reason his whole body couldn't do the same.

Acromdo's final words, admitting defeat and appearing to raise Qwell's morale, were also trying to make her come closer and get caught in the self-destructive blast.

"Haaah, haaah...!"

There was something she needed to do first, before getting an actual mental understanding of the threat she faced.

She felt around inside the wound in her flank with her fingers, and just as she had imagined, they entangled around something resembling thin roots.

“Mrrmmmmph...!”

Putting her other hand up to her mouth, she stifled her scream. She began to drag the object out of her own body as if literally pulling out a weed. Lying on the ground, Qwell’s body violently spasmed against her will, and she could feel her sight come and go, even with her eyes closed.

Sure enough, the bloody object was the root of a plant. She was lucky that he had attacked her flank, and that the roots never reached the motor nerves in her arms or legs...or her spine.

“A...plant... Who even...could make such a revenant...”

If the roots themselves were her enemy’s true body, then perhaps it wasn’t a revenant at all, but something else?

Seeing as Acromdo had broken into Qwell’s house and attempted to parasitize her with this root, it would mean that infesting Qwell was his goal from the start.

With her combat concentration broken, the uproar from the street outside reached her ears.

There was some sort of commotion going on. Acromdo had infiltrated her house all on his own, but maybe he had needed to come with someone else in order to break through the district’s security.

An assault, large enough in scale to include a diversion, targeting a hero candidate sponsor.

If that was the case, wouldn’t this be sabotage of the Sixways Exhibition, targeting Psianop?

“Haaah...haaah...”

She wrapped a towel around herself. Her body, freshly out of the bath, was heavily dirtied with blood and sweat.

The one scar carved into her velvety skin had been gouged even bigger than it was before. She would need Life Arts treatment immediately.

“Ahh...but... Tee...tee-hee-hee.”

Still, she had won.

She had managed to be victorious against an unknown enemy.

An opponent that, prior to her training with Psianop, when she

still had unpolished combat thinking and technique, she would've never been able to best.

“I—I won...Psianop.”

It wasn't that some authority somewhere had said that being strong was right and proper.

Even then, proper strength did exist.

Qwell thought the pain from her wound, and the elation of victory, proved this fact to her more than anything else.

At the same time as the raid on Qwell's home, the area around the Yotu Canal's wharf was lit up and buzzing with activity even late into the night, with many shops still open. Even while in such an area, Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation did his utmost to avoid showing himself to the eyes of others. In this instance, he traveled along the edge of the road, unilluminated by the streetlights, to prevent any of the citizens coming and going through the center of the boulevard from picking up on him.

As a beastfolk, if he wasn't a hero candidate, he wouldn't have even been able to gain citizenship in the first place. Simply making unnecessary contact with the city denizens could invite unnecessary conflict. Though, of course, Psianop doubted that others in his position—like Alus, Shalk, or Mestelexil—ever showed consideration toward the feelings of the citizens like this.

"You, minia there."

Therefore, he could clearly pick up on the presence among the crowd who was focusing on him.

Psianop stopped on the spot and called out to the person behind him.

"If you have some business with me, then let's get it over with."

The silhouette behind him seemed resigned to the situation as they moved. It was a woman.

"Whoa, whoa, c'mon now. Don't sound so scary, Psianop."

"The Twenty-First General of Aureatia's Twenty-Nine Officials, Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam, I'm guessing."

Even without her coming into view, he could distinguish who she was just by her build and voice.

Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam. She wasn't a hero candidate sponsor. He generally had a grasp on the faces and appearances of the Twenty-Nine Officials, but she was someone whom Psianop, at the very least, still had no connection with.

"I just came up to you, all right? You don't have to get all menacing like that, do you?"

"In my position, I'm not letting my guard down around any of

the Twenty-Nine Officials except for my sponsor, that's all. There's the invisible army matter, too, right?"

"Whatever invisible army or not, there's not a single person out there who's gonna be able to catch you off guard... Mind if I come a bit closer? I gotta really shout to talk from this far away!"

"Do as you will."

Tuturi lightly shook her head and gingerly closed the distance. She looked fed up and annoyed.

"Okay, so, Psianop? I'm just doing my job, okay? If I say something that rubs you the wrong way, don't go laying me out all of sudden or anything."

"...Who do you take me for exactly? If we're having a scrap, there's not much difference between this distance and where you were standing before. What do you want?"

"What do you plan to do for your match against Lucnoca?"

"...That's what this is about."

A boring topic he had been asked about over and over again.

Almost all of the minia in Aureatia were thinking the same thing. In the upcoming ninth match, Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation was going to lose. There wasn't the slightest hope he could beat Lucnoca the Winter.

Everyone made it clear they were thinking under that pretext even without saying so, and the more brazen ones among them would come right out and ridicule or take pity on Psianop.

Even when he caught sight of such people, he didn't especially intend to make them rethink things. It was the truth, after all.

"Nothing's going to happen. Lucnoca and I will fight, then I'll lose. That's my estimation."

"Whaaat?"

"Don't tell me you thought I intended to win? I believe in my own strength, but I'm not a daydreamer who ignores reality. I understood after I looked at the battle scars in the Mali Wastes. The techniques I've trained for over twenty-one years are no match for something like that. It's an irreversible fact."

"...Uh. Wait, wait, wait. Hold on here."

Tuturi wore an exasperated and bewildered look.

There were many who couldn't understand what Psianop or Neft had considered obviously logical. Psianop had known that for a long time.

"So you're saying you *don't* plan on withdrawing? You said

fight, right? In other words...you're saying you're going to die then, right?"

"I suppose so."

"I suppose so"? That's it? You gotta be kidding me."

How annoying. These types always wanted an explanation.

Why did he think this way; what was correct; for what reason would he do that?

Even if Psianop were to explain his entire thought process in detail, in the end, once it was put into words, it would become mere disjointed information. Whether the listener was convinced or not, he essentially wouldn't have gotten anything across at all.

"Okay, so what exactly do you me—"

"It'll go against my principles. I came here to prove that I'm the strongest of all."

"Hey, okay, uhhh. If you're trying to prove you're the strongest, then deliberately accepting defeat makes even less sense. That's all the more reason why...you can always back out in the worst-case scenario, and it still won't be too late even after you try out all sorts of other different ways to win..."

"So you're maintaining that, since I haven't fought yet, if I choose to retreat for now, I haven't lost? You think a childish tantrum like that'll mean *in truth I was actually the strongest*? Surely you haven't forgotten. The moment hero candidates put their name forward, they needed to possess the strength capable of defeating the True Demon King. I decided that I was fine putting my life on the line in order to prove that. If this proof is mistaken, then I'm supposed to lose my life."

Psianop had said too much. If he kept talking, he would end up getting away from the main essence of his point.

If Tuturi was going to keep talking about Lucnoca the Winter any further, he would simply ignore her and leave.

"Okay, look, Psianop...here's the thing," Tuturi said as she held her forehead. She was clearly trying to look for some means of negotiation.

Psianop decided to take his leave.

"I really, well... I can't stand liars."

"Say what you will. I'm leaving."

"...Do you plan on dying and leaving Qwell behind?"

Psianop stopped.

To Tuturi, it was probably nothing but a haphazard question

said as a last resort.

However, it made Psianop, intending to completely ignore Tuturi, waver for a single second.

Whether he won or lost, Psianop had thrown his name into the Sixways Exhibition intending to throw his life away from the beginning. Now, due to an encounter following his decision to lay down his life, previously absent distracting thoughts came to his mind. Though they amounted to little more than a slight amount of hope.

What if, after fighting through the deadly battles of the Sixways Exhibition, Psianop *was still alive*?

If he could watch someone inherit his life, which had come to nothing, and watch them capitalize on it in the future?

Would he be able to pass his techniques on to Qwell?

“...Listen. Lucnoca the Winter? It’s hopeless. With that dragon, it’s not about being strong or not. She’s on a completely different level. That monster hasn’t made aaaaany effort at all to win, and has no reason why she needs to win, either. She’s no different from a natural disaster.”

Efforts or the presence of a firm will didn’t necessarily determine one’s strength.

This was heartless logic that ran contrary to the people’s fantasies and stood in opposition to their ideas of heroism and valor. The weak had no right to criticize the way the strong lived.

“So, Psianop. You’re lying, aren’t you? If right now...and I’m just speaking hypothetically here, if right now you were struck dead by lightning, would you be fine with that? That’s basically what it’ll mean to go up against Lucnoca in a fight.”

“Trying to beat lightning is a foolish endeavor, is that it?”

“I didn’t say that. But what do you think will happen to Qwell once you leave her behind?”

“...”

“If there are others out there looking to beat lightning, they’re gonna be just as serious about it. Normally, there wouldn’t even be any room for you to butt in... All the more reason to, see? Why don’t you work together with us, Psianop?”

“What’s in it for me?”

“...All right, I guess I can tell you. In the ninth match, the Aureatia army is going to attack Lucnoca. Before your match even starts, too.”

“What?”

For Psianop, this was entirely unanticipated news.

Or more precisely, incomprehensible news.

Even if the Aureatia army threw all their combined might into the attack, it was close to impossible to believe they'd cause any damage to an opponent like Lucnoca the Winter. It seemed like nothing but an act of sheer stupidity that could erase all of Aureatia.

“...I know what you're thinking: ‘How could they be so dumb?’ Rosclay would do it, though. He's a coward, see, and he's scared of facing Lucnoca the Winter in round three. That's why he's thinking about eliminating Lucnoca before it's his turn to square off against her... All of Aureatia will go into action if it's to ensure he wins. You realize that's the sort of enemy you're dealing with, right?”

“Let me assume you're telling the truth. Several tens of thousands of minians will end up dead all to prop up a middlingly strong man as hero? It doesn't make sense at all.”

“Well, I mean, even Aureatia's got their trump cards, okay? They've got enchanted swords, magic tools, not to mention the defeated hero candidates. Someone like Mele the Horizon's Roar—he might even have the strength to face off against Lucnoca. But... *hah-hah*, I figured as much... Psianop, you don't really know what the word ‘hero’ means.”

Tuturi laughed. It was different from before, a darkness mixed in with her expression.

“Even tens of thousands of lives are a suitable price. During the era of the Demon King, there were several hundreds of millions who ended up dead. With so many people, just claiming that some nobody cleared it all up without anyone knowing isn't gonna satisfy things. We have to decide on a Hero, Psianop, 'cause we need someone *who saved the world to stand right before our eyes*. Inside their hearts, everyone's thinking the same thing.”

“...And you mean to say that Lucnoca the Winter, Alus the Star Runner, and Toroa the Awful are the ones who need to be killed as a substitute for the True Demon King? If that was true, it would be an extremely senseless idea. No one's living their life just to satisfy you all.”

“But that's how things've ended up. That's why all of them are going so far, and why they put together his sham Sixways Exhibition nonsense in the first place. I'll declare right here that, at

this rate, you won't even get your match against Lucnoca... Tens of thousands of Aureatia soldiers will fight against her and die. But with us, we can get you to the arena faster than the Aureatia army can begin their own fight."

"You mean to say...if I can defeat Lucnoca, there won't be any unnecessary casualties."

Psianop equally wished for that outcome himself.

Now that he had wagered his life, he didn't want to lose the actual opportunities to fight.

However, from the moment Tuturi had brought up the information about Aureatia's attack, she had been secretly changing the topic. Tuturi's was supposed to have been interrogating Psianop as to why *he wasn't scared to die* in a fight with Lucnoca. She was trying to use the means of victory against Lucnoca as a negotiating point, not the possibility of whether or not the match would actually be held.

In which case, said means could only lead to one thing: Tuturi's group was also trying to attempt some type of foul play and wished to make Psianop win and advance.

Taking advantage of the attack by Aureatia's army, Tuturi's force was guaranteed to *do something*. They were trying to win over Psianop—the opposing force in the match—to ensure he didn't interfere with the plan they were attempting to carry out during the ninth match.

Then Tuturi's forces are... Well, an investigation led by someone in my position won't really get anywhere...

An inconceivably large force was moving behind the scenes of the Sixways Exhibition, and a similarly massive power was necessary to fight against it. Even if Psianop tried to avoid it all, it likely wasn't something that *could* be avoided.

Those without such power would ultimately become unable to even fight one-on-one anymore.

If it was set up to go this way regardless of Psianop's own intention, that was fine, too.

He intended to fight against Lucnoca from the very start. If he had to take on an army or two in addition to that, it didn't change very much.

I'm going to fight my match exactly how I want. In exchange, I'll knock down any others who try to interfere.

"See, me...when I say I'll do something, I really mean it, okay?"

How about you, Psianop? Will you do this for us?"

"You people will bring me to the arena. In exchange, I will have my match against Lucnoca on the spot. That's it."

He was going to fight one-on-one. That was the greatest compromise he could make as a martial artist.

"There's nothing more than that."



The following morning, it appeared Psianop had caught wind of the attack on Qwell.

Since one of the Twenty-Nine Officials was physically attacked during ongoing suspicions of a vampire force in the shadows, the arrangements were speedily made to clean up after the incident. Qwell's wound on her side had almost fully healed via Life Arts treatment by the time Psianop arrived at the hospital.

"Does it still hurt?"

She had to sit on the edge of the bed to look down at Psianop on the floor.

"I-I'm fine. It only dug down to the fat below the skin, so...the wound never reached my muscles."

Qwell smiled frailly.

This feebleness stemmed from her natural personality. None of her body parts were missing, so the doctors had told her that the Life Arts-induced regeneration would not be too much of a burden for her.

"...Need to hone yourself more."

"I know."

Psianop's harsh words made Qwell happy.

He was acknowledging that she had the strength to protect herself.

"You still don't know who this Acromdo the Variety fellow is?"

"We don't. Th-the roots that were implanted in me and another man...seem to wither away immediately if they don't parasitize living flesh... Though the whole idea that the plant had a mind of its own is just my h-hypothesis, so, erm...so Flinsuda said it would take more time to investigate..."

"Don't place too much trust in that Flinsuda. No telling who's paid her off."

“Hee-hee... Th-that’s true.”

Qwell couldn’t suppress a laugh at Psianop’s almost fatherly remark.

She didn’t know the identity behind the force that attacked her. Qwell didn’t belong to any of the factions, so while she could say there was some benefit to winning her over for any of the different powers at play, she could just as easily say there wasn’t.

“Psianop. About the next match...”

“Nothing to worry about. I can fight perfectly fine myself whether you’re there or not.”

Psianop had surely surmised that this latest attack involved someone’s schemes surrounding the ninth match. Even that wouldn’t have been enough to stop him.

“I think I remember Soujirou the Willow-Sword being one of the other patients admitted here. You’ll be far safer here than in the Mali Wastes. Stay alert, though. You need to protect yourself.”

“...I know.”

That wasn’t it. She was worried about Psianop.

After the match against Toroa the Awful, Qwell chatted with Psianop. The ooze said he intended to exhaust his life to win the Sixways Exhibition. Even without precisely putting it into words, they shared the understanding that Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation was going to fight Lucnoca the Winter, and that was how he meant to live and die.

The two had said almost nothing to each other regarding the ninth match against Lucnoca the Winter.

In which case, could Psianop’s visit to Qwell in the hospital be to give his final farewells ahead of the match?

“The whole time...ever since the Sixways Exhibition bracket was decided on...in truth, I wanted you to tell me.”

Somewhere in her heart, she wondered why.

“That you can win.”

“...”

She was hoping that he’d prove he truly was the strongest of all, even if was in exchange for his life.

She wished that he would survive, even if he forsook all his fights.

Neither of these were what she truly thought, though. She actually wanted him to fight, to win, and to survive.

“But, Psianop...hee-hee, you can’t ever lie about your estimation

of things...”

“That’s true.”

Qwell looked toward the window.

The sky she saw on the other side seemed higher than usual.

Perhaps Qwell felt so because she rarely ever looked up.

“...”

They spent more of their time together in silence than they did conversing, but it was comfortable.

Qwell was always poor at expressing in words what she felt in her heart, and she couldn’t explain what she wanted to convey. Psianop had been the first person to let her converse through combat.

“...Qwell. You will grow stronger. From here on out, practice everything I’ve taught you, and more.”

“I will.”

Even when saying their farewells, Psianop never asserted he could win.

Qwell was glad that he didn’t give her any easy words of comfort like that.

Nevertheless, Psianop *hadn’t said he would lose, either.*

She wanted to give him a proper fight.

I’ll fight, too.

There was no more pain from the wound in her stomach. She steeled herself.

I’m Psianop’s sponsor.

The military barracks office. Hidow the Clamp had only been inside the room a handful of times, even during his time as one of the Twenty-Nine Officials. It was essentially the living space of the Twenty-Seventh General in command of the military, Haade the Flashpoint.

However, this time, Haade was confronting Hidow with a different face.

“Real stroke of bad luck, eh, Hidow?”

Opposite Hidow, sitting with his legs crossed in the visitor’s chair, Haade puffed on his cigar on the other side of his large desk.

Wrinkles and white hair accumulated over his many years, as well as a sharp gleam in his eye that showed no signs of waning.

The fact that he treated Hidow with the same attitude after he had been expelled from the assembly and reverted to being just a young noble was really an expression of Haade’s power and composure.

“Sounds like that old fart Iriolde’s taken an awful strong liking to you, eh? I bet it must’ve been a real nuisance coming up with all the mess going on, but I’ve some circumstances of my own, and that means I gotta keep on his good side.”

“The leader of the world’s largest army is scared of an old codger on his deathbed? Pretty pathetic to hear, Haade.”

“*Gwah-hah-hah!* Don’t say that. I plan on getting back at that old dog in my own way.”

The largest opposition force against Rosclay’s reformation group, presently the mainstream faction amongst the Aureatia Assembly. This was the military faction under Haade’s command—or that was how it was perceived by society at large.

However, above that was an even greater mastermind proceeding with a plan to overthrow Aureatia.

That mastermind was the former Fifth Minister, Iriolde the Atypical Tome.

Economic support for the New Principality of Lithia’s independence. Taking over the Toghie City assembly for the Old

Kingdoms' loyalist uprising. It was said that Iriolde's powerful connections and resources lay behind the scenes of the numerous disturbances that suddenly occurred ahead of the Sixways Exhibition. If anything, it was unnatural that a player as dangerous as him hadn't been assassinated following his expulsion from the Aureatia Assembly...

"You and your military...were sheltering him from the very beginning, weren't you? Well then, of course all that time would pass by without him ever getting caught, huh?! What the hell were you thinking during Alus's attack? You're telling me you feigned ignorance, collaborated with Rosclay...while the whole time secretly scheming to overthrow Aureatia?"

"Of course." Haade answered Hidow's denunciation without so much as a twitch. "If Aureatia really does end up in ruins, I'd be in trouble, obviously, but Iriolde would be, too. I mean, he's doing all this because of how much he wants Aureatia for himself. Hell, for Lithia and Toghie, it was all just about pecking away at the reformation party's ability to respond to things... The actual Sixways Exhibition started without any incident, right? Gathering up threats to Aureatia and disposing of them meant that his interests aligned with Rosclay's factions—at *least partway through*, anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"Iriolde doesn't even think there needs to be any Hero in the first place."

"..."

He wanted the Hero who defeated the True Demon King.

All the people who lived in this world longed for them. Even Rosclay and that ice-cool and composed Jelky were acting to make this sole longing of the age come to fruition.

"So, Hidow. We're thinking it's about time to put an end to this whole farce."

"Hold up...! You're going to halt the Sixways Exhibition midway through?! Sure, Iriolde may be fine with all that, but do all the people below him know?!"

"Gwah... I mean. Hell, I want a Hero, too. Thing is, see. For all of us who know the behind-the-scenes details, we know that any hero decided by the Sixways Exhibition *will still ultimately be a phony*. We're all hellbent on some crap we never believed in to begin with... Ridiculous, don't you think?"

“...”

What Haade said wasn't wrong. There hadn't been a day during the Sixways Exhibition, while everyone was desperately fighting, that Hidow hadn't felt doubts about his actions. Even then, as one of the Twenty-Nine Officials, he needed to believe that the symbol of the Hero would truly bring salvation to the people.

However, some aberrations didn't share this same ideology.

The shura, who believed themselves strongest of all. The Gray-Haired Child, from beyond this belief of theirs.

Or others like Haade and Iriolde, who didn't believe in anything but power.

“...What are you going to do about the hero candidates? There's no other way to get rid of them all without using an opportunity like this!”

“Not so sure about that. With the first round over, the players left on the Sixways Exhibition stage are... Psianop. Lucnoca. Soujirou. Rosclay. Kuze. Shalk. Uhak. Mele losing one eye may've been a windfall, but there are still others like Kia or Mestelexil who are gonna need to be dealt with outside the tournament structure. If the goal was just to measure their fighting power, the first round was enough to do the job. Among the eight left...how many can only be killed within the confines of the Sixways Exhibition?”

“...Lucnoca the Winter. She'll only come out of Iganias Ice Lake and fly to the Mali Wastes on her own for the Sixways Exhibition. She wants to enjoy herself fighting, so she won't imagine that she's falling into a trap. Beyond the Sixways Exhibition, there are no circumstances that would make it possible for minian races to battle Lucnoca the Winter profitably.”

“See, you get it. So if Lucnoca's disposed of in the next match, then the Sixways Exhibition is over.”

“We wouldn't have so much trouble if it was that simple.”

Originally, Rosclay had the same plan. They'd make both Alus and Lucnoca fight to the death in the second match, and they'd annihilate the other with Aureatia's combined forces. However, Lucnoca's fighting capabilities eclipsed all predictions, as if she existed in a completely different dimension. And even Alus, supposedly killed in battle, made a monstrous recovery and launched an immense attack on Aureatia.

As a result, the combined forces of the hero candidates and Aureatia's full military might had been needed to face Alus the Star

Runner. There was absolutely no hope of coming up with a countermeasure against the healthy Lucnoca.

"I saw the second match. Aureatia can't kill Lucnoca."

"Pfft. Don't tell me that testimony of yours is the only grounds for all of this. Rosclay and his buddies are making their moves fully aware of the discrepancy in fighting power, right?"

"...? Of course it's not. Our camp isn't a place where personal judgments without evidence are taken at face value. No clue about how it goes for all of you, though."

"Forget it. It's basically just what I imagined. Rosclay doesn't intend to make any moves during the ninth match."

Before Hidow could ask Haade more, there was a knock from the other side of the office door.

Haade urged them to enter without sparing a look in their direction.

"Excuse me, General Haade. I have information to report regarding our investigation, but..."

The soldier glanced over at Hidow sitting in his chair.

"Oh, you can ignore him; he's fine. Go ahead."

"...Yessir. Indeed, the reformation faction's military shows no signs of any activity. In addition to no flow of personnel, there's nothing to suggest the magic tools stored in each region were brought forth, either... The only remaining possibility is deploying the hero candidates, but—"

"No movement from them, either."

"That's right, sir."

"I figured at least they'd make Mele provide ballistic fire, but... in that case, it'll mean that Lucnoca the Winter will be completely let loose during the ninth match, huh? Watching on the sides and kicking her extermination down the road."

Even after he made the messenger leave the room, Haade appeared to be spending a long time thinking things over.

"..."

Appeared to be—since to Hidow, it felt like Haade was trying to pretend that the conclusion he had already reached in his mind was instead an answer he got after thinking it over.

"Hey, Hidow... Looks like we're just gonna have to do it."

Haade then spread his mouth into a hitherto unseen, and pleased, smile.

"...You're kidding," Hidow could only reply in blank

amazement. “*You all* are going to take on Lucnoca the Winter?”

“I saw it the same way; Aureatia can’t beat that thing. But we’re *not the Aureatia army*. Even up against an opponent like Lucnoca the Winter, we have plenty of tricks that only we can use.”

It wasn’t that sort of problem at all. He was going off the rails.

Haade’s decision would simply lead to pouring fighting power—meant to be deployed in overthrowing Aureatia—up against an opponent like Lucnoca and exhausting it all. Even if they did manage to defeat her, what exactly would they do after?

What was going through Haade and Iriolde’s mind about what waited for them at the end of this fight?

“What the hell are you smiling about...Haade?”

“You think it’s weird for me to smile? We’re the only ones who get to wage war against the strongest dragon of all...”

Haade the Flashpoint. The strongest military officer standing atop Aureatia. Soujirou the Willow-Sword’s sponsor.

This old general possessed a certain abnormal temperament, one which he shared with the visitor he sponsored.

“I absolutely love war.”

Late at night on the day before the ninth match, lights speckled the darkness-shrouded ice field at the Mali Wastes.

It was artificial light, forming a line along the road or placed to encircle specific areas. And with them were people, tens of times greater in number than the lights, wriggling within the darkness.

It was a combat engineer squad under Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam's direct command.

When it came to sneaking into the arena and sabotaging things ahead of time, the rules for the Sixways Exhibition had initially established a certain number of loopholes that allowed said rules to be applied arbitrarily.

However, the act of sneaking into the arena with a full military company to set up a trap meant to eliminate a hero candidate as part of a large-scale *operation* was outrageous, completely unprecedented in the Kingdom's imperial games.

The members of Rosclay's camp likely had an inkling of the ambitious undertaking by their enemy in Haade's camp. Yet the more one was privy to the internal circumstances within the Sixways Exhibition, the less they would try to stop this reckless act.

Now, with her original sponsor leaving the stage and with the menace of Alus the Star Runner known across all of Aureatia, there wasn't anyone who desired to see Lucnoca the Winter continue to advance through the tournament.

Tuturi's squad was beginning to make the finishing touches on their operation to kill Lucnoca.

"...Dammit," Tuturi cursed, looking up at the clear, frozen night sky. "It's way too cold."

The decision Haade the Flashpoint had reached was, for Tuturi, inscrutable. Someone at some point needed to defeat Lucnoca the Winter, which was all the more reason why the best course of action would have been to *make* Rosclay's camp deal with her before the match. If they had simply waited patiently, wouldn't it have been possible to coerce Rosclay, left to fight against her in the following semifinal, into disposing of her?

“Well? Think we can finish this up tonight?” she asked the secretary standing next to her. She understood the operation’s state of progress already, so there wasn’t much meaning behind her question.

“Hm, I believe the possibility is certainly there. The delay in the drilling operation itself was unexpected; however, the men on site are accustomed to the task. We were fortunate to have four days to work with.”

“I see.”

Ultimately, Haade’s inscrutable snap judgment had been correct.

Aureatia’s soldiers, not just Tuturi’s unit, lacked experience working in such extremely cold climates, and far more time than Tuturi had calculated was exhausted on drilling through the frozen earth and on breaks to warm up the engineer’s bodies. Beginning to move right as Tuturi judged it best to wait had been the correct call.

Hell, all the records involving establishing mines in cold regions are from long before the era of the Demon King, too. General Haade’s predictions of the soldiers’ proficiency and technological development are far more precise than mine...

Tuturi liked war. She liked working out a strategy, making predictions, and overpowering her enemies. However, whenever she compared this fondness she held with Haade the Flashpoint, she couldn’t help wondering if what she did amounted to nothing more than the pretend war games she played as a child. The fact that he understood everything down to the atmosphere of an unknown battlefield he had never visited before, and could make judgments without wavering at all, had to be because his love for war was deeper than any other.

If anything, the troops’ morale is only getting higher. Defending Aureatia themselves in place of the reformation faction has galvanized them—but isn’t the end result here that we’re just exhausting our fighting force before we fight our true war? Maybe General Haade has some reason to purposely take on a clear disadvantage?

Her squad would be the ones paying the costs for it. Tuturi tried to consider what they would stand to gain in exchange. Something more valuable than themselves.

...Whoa, c’mon now. Way too late to think about this stuff.

She quietly chuckled to herself.

Something was odd, ever since that day she had laid eyes on Lucnoca the Winter.

She couldn't stop thinking about what she lacked, or things she couldn't reach. Tuturi's strength had always been her ability to focus on her duty as a soldier, and not think about *meaningless* nonsense, wasn't it?

When she looked up, she saw a human figure walking unsteadily through the path lined with work lamps at even intervals. A young man in a white robe, with a messy mop of hair. He was one of the self-proclaimed demon kings from the National Defense Research Institute.

"Mr. Yukis. Is the work on the east side finished?"

"Ah! Miss Tuturi!"

Yukis the Ground Colony needlessly bounded into the air.

"It's so cold! *Brrrrr!* I can't stop regulating my body temperature with involuntary muscle movement! Why is everyone else so nonchalant about it?! It's way too cold!"

"We're all cold. You're just the only one who's going out of his way to make a fuss about it. I'm guessing with that attitude that you finished the work I left you? You want to rest up near the fire, is that it?"

"Ah, Miss Tuturi, you're so quick on the uptake!"

"Obviously, you can't do that. Go head over to the north side."

"Whaaat?!"

Yukis, practically bending backward, screamed so outrageously, one might wonder if it was all an act, but the man was genuinely this eccentric.

Adequately appeasing and making use of nuisances outside Haade's military control, like him, were among the many roles entrusted to Tuturi.

"...Eh, a little break should be fine, I guess. Can you answer some questions about the weapon we're using for this operation? That'll give you some time to warm up by the fire."

"How excellent! You have quite the technical curiosity, don't you?"

"Oh, but if someone else comes to report something, I'm going to listen to them first. Go ahead."

"*Hee-hee!* Well then, if you'll pardon me a moment."

Delightedly coming up beside Tuturi, Yukis was illuminated in the light of the bonfire. Some viscous pale-yellow substance was

dripping from inside the sleeve of his white robe.

“Blergh, gross. What is that?”

“Oh, my apologies! Well, you see, I used the heat from the fermentation of bird droppings to warm up the inside of my clothes! Now, I developed this new fungus with its absolutely superb rate of decomposition, but...for some reason, it’s quite unpopular! Would you like one of your own, Miss Tuturi? I really do recommend it!”

“I wager it’s unpopular because of how utterly filthy it is. Can you tell me about the weapon now?”

“It’s such a wonderful invention, totally resource sustainable, too... Oh well, I say there’s certainly no room to claim that this latest weapon against Lucnoca isn’t a wonderful invention of its own! Now then, Miss Tuturi. When killing a dragon, what characteristic of theirs do you think poses the biggest obstacle?”

“Their ability to fly,” Tuturi answered without hesitation. “All of their characteristics are pretty much unmatched and impossible to deal with, but ask a soldier like me the worst one, it’s flight. They can get a grasp of the battlefield while remaining constantly out of range, as well as freely descend to lay waste to anywhere along the battle line... Even a theoretical plane would find the feat impossible, and for them it’s an innate characteristic of their species.”

“Yes, yes, very good points! Certainly, an understandable opinion from a strategic point of view. Now, I don’t mean to raise an objection here...however! In that case, you could say the same thing about wyverns, yes?!”

Yukis exaggeratedly waved both hands as if he were flapping his wings.

“I guess. You’re right; when up against wyverns, even minia can manage to take them on. A normal wyvern, at the end of the day, needs to drop its high speed if it wants to attack, so it’s possible to shoot them down with bows and guns...”

Wyverns’ fundamental means of attack were their claws. The reason Alus the Star Runner—equipped with a multitude of long-range methods of attack—and Lithia’s air force—able to gather information and make coordinated air attacks—were such fearsome foes was because they had been wyverns who outdid common wyvern tactics.

“But a dragon could swoop low, and it’d still be impossible to shoot them down. In that case, the most threatening characteristic

of theirs would be their dragon scales—is that what you’re getting at?”

“Ohhh no, you got there before me! You’re absolutely right! In short, my bacteriological weapon is meant to break through those dragon scales of theirs! The areas not protected by dragon scales—their lungs, eyeballs, or the mucosa of their digestive organs! My idea is to deliver fatal toxins through these areas directly!”

“So, the theory is that you’re simply using these invisible organisms to transmit what’s virtually akin to a vapor gas attack. But is that gonna work? Aren’t living organisms weak against drastic environmental changes?”

“*Hee-hee-hee!* These latest bacteriological weapons are a new species made by my oh-so-adorable Nectegio, you see! They can function in low-temperature environments without any problem. Isn’t it incredible? Of course, no matter how well they can take low temperatures, a direct breath attack from Lucnoca the Winter will completely annihilate them, but...did you know *the one place that’s perfectly safe* when a dragon launches their breath?”

The opposite side from their Word Arts focal point—those unfamiliar with Lucnoca the Winter would likely come to this answer. This was completely mistaken. The second match proved as much.

Yukis hit his own throat with his finger, still in his hunched-over posture.

“Inside the dragon’s own body.”

With the dragon scales covering her body, sparkling like ice crystals, and their abiotic beauty, Lucnoca the Winter seemed to be ultra-cold ice incarnate.

However, in actuality, the dragon was still nothing but a living creature, filled with flesh and blood.

“Lucnoca the Winter’s breath freezes all the gaseous molecules in the air and creates a momentary vacuum, but even then, the inside of Lucnoca’s respiratory organs at the very least...should still have enough air inside of them to maintain biological activity. As long as there’s that small remaining air, heat, and moisture, then Nectegio’s bacteriological weapons will be able to continue on without a problem. Even if she only takes in a trace amount of them, they will continue to multiply within Lucnoca’s internal environment. Their variety of toxic materials will first paralyze her nerve cells. Gradually, proteins, starting with her muscles, will

dissolve...guaranteed to then lead to her death.”

“...”

Yukis the Ground Colony was not a self-proclaimed demon king like Kiyazuna the Axle or Viga the Clamor, who was recorded to have opposed Aureatia with clear intent. Tuturi hadn't been provided detailed knowledge about how this man, previously performing reckless bacteriological experiments out on the frontier, had caught Iriolde's eye and joined the National Defense Research Institute, or the course of events that led there. Without knowing his past, it was easy to look at him merely as an eccentric and weird man.

However, the malice hidden behind his abnormal words and actions was extremely brutal, and real.

“There are two hundred and eleven *mines* that will deploy this biotoxin. The question I have is whether or not this poison will also work on an ooze, too. What do you think?”

“Oooh, an ooze... I'm so sorry! None of the specifications I was given contained any request in that vein! It's safe to say that it'll have practically zero efficacy on an ooze! While it is sure to get taken up inside its body, depending on the species of creature, they'll have a different level of acidity in their body fluids! The weapons can't produce toxins without being under the proper conditions, you see! Oh, but of course, in the case of bacteriological weapons, if anything, they prove even more effective if they're nontoxic to everyone except the target! You understand this, yes?!”

“Well, yeah, my squad wouldn't be able to put the plan into action if the poison also affected the minian races. Better if they don't work. If possible, I'd like to have Psianop draw Lucnoca's attention. Even if it's only long enough to blink, the more factors that'll buy us time while fighting against her, the better.”

Lucnoca the Winter was the strongest specimen among the strongest races of all.

Normally, Tuturi could have bunched together all the powerful fighters she knew, and they would even last longer than a blink of an eye. However, if it was one of the Sixways Exhibition hero candidates doing it, it may have been possible.

Alus the Star Runner would have been able to finish off Lucnoca the Winter if he had held out just a bit longer. Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation, who laid one of the First Party low, would likely be enough to stall for a fair amount of time. Just as Shalk the

Sound Slicer had continued to draw self-proclaimed demon king Alus's attention, if Psianop challenged her himself and focused on running away to serve as the bait for as long as possible, Tuturi's chances of success would drastically increase. This was what she was hoping for.

"Huuuuuh?! But Nectegio's bacteriological weapons are an absolute, surefire solution! I developed an extremely rational means of eliminating Lucnoca the Winter, but you don't even trust it?!"

"*Hah-hah*, nope, not a lot of faith," Tuturi answered with a half smile. "Oh, but I totally get that your technology is the real deal, Mr. Yukis, okay? But I just know that Lucnoca the Winter's strength is just...*not on that level at all*. See, if you're going to kill someone like her, seems like you'd need to have three to four guaranteed, surefire ways to be safe. Your bacteria weapons might help out the methods that the other guys have come up with, or it could end up being the last little push to kill her. It's my job to do absolutely anything to make sure she ends up dead in the end."

"*Meeeeh*, I understand what you're saying, but it's still sad...to hear your level of confidence in me..."

"Yukis, your clothes are on fire."

"*Eyyaaagh?! I was too close to the flame! Radiant heat-induced combustion!*"

Yukis rolled around on the ground and began to get covered in frost. He was supposed to be taking a break to warm up by the fire, and now he was right back where he had started. Tuturi dryly smiled.

"*Aaaaaagh! It's so cold!*"

"...Once you've settled down, go out and look at the next spot. You're going to go around to see all of them before the night's over anyway. May as well get it out of the way early."

Leaving Yukis behind, Tuturi departed from the bonfire. She had left the soldier with a report waiting a bit, but considering they waited without interrupting her conversation, it likely wasn't that important of a report.

"So, what's up?"

"Um... Someone has come requesting a meeting with you, Miss Tuturi."

"Like hell I'd meet with them. Who are they, some messenger from General Haade or old man Iriolde? Even then, no sane person would be coming out to the Mali Wastes at this time of night."

C'mon, you can't even detain and interrogate them without me having to order you to do it?"

"Well... It's Tenth General Qwell. I believe she might have something to discuss with you regarding the arrangements for the ninth match tomorrow..."

"Ahh..."

True enough, one of the Twenty-Nine Officials couldn't be restrained at the discretion of a mere foot soldier.

Tuturi scratched her head.

I thought she might get an inkling of what was going on with the whole Acromdo attack, but...still, to come all the way to the Mali Wastes just to complain about it...

Tuturi knew about the operation to use Acromdo the Variety to bring Qwell under the control of Iriolde's camp. It was in part an experiment by the National Defense Research Institute ahead of his practical combat utilization in the ninth match, but it was still a very aggressive card to play. Perhaps it was because this grand undertaking was imminent, but everyone was beginning to do whatever they felt like—though that might have also been the case for Tuturi herself.

"Should I have her leave, then?"

"Nah, I'll go. If she's who I'm dealing with, I'll at least try talking to her, I guess..."

Dealing with these kinds of nuisances was one of the roles entrusted to Tuturi.

In either case, it wasn't going to change what she would do.



Qwell the Wax Flower was sitting with both hands clenched tightly in her lap on a plain chair inside the temporary tent.

The eyes visible through the gaps in her long bangs were big, like a child's, and shone fiery silver in the dark night.

"Heya, Qwell."

Entering the tent, Tuturi called to her with the friendliest smile she could muster. Qwell mumbled something in response and appeared to give a very small bow.

"What's brought you out all this way? It's freezing here, right? Want me to grab you some of the soup we're giving the engineers?"

“...Tuturi.”

Qwell still hung her head, but looked with upturned eyes at Tuturi, and then she turned toward the countless lights that still illuminated the darkness.

As if scared of her follow-up, she took in a small breath before continuing.

“What...did you plan to do?”

“Uhh, by that you mean...?”

Then, she said something unbelievable.

“Isn’t this foul play...?”

Whoa, whoa, hold on.

Tuturi never thought she would be hearing this *at this stage in the game.*

When she thought about why Qwell would have come here, the incident with Acromdo the Variety had to be the only answer. She had even considered the possibility that, depending on the situation, Qwell might have come with Psianop to pursue the matter.

“Uh, so listen. Qwell? You’re saying that *now*? Is this really the time? Calm down a minute and listen here, girl. It was just the same with Alus the Star Runner. We gotta defeat Lucnoca the Winter. Together, with everyone in Aureatia. This goes way beyond foul play or anything.”

“I’m thinking. Everyone makes fun of me, but... I—I... I-I’m always thinking. That Acromdo person’s attack...y-you all sent him to do that, didn’t you?”

Qwell weakly objected. She not only looked weak, but she also was a truly timid girl. A dhampir whose martial abilities—and her martial abilities alone—were abnormally strong, and she had used them to work her way up to the Twenty-Nine Officials. It was safe to say that not much was expected from any other of her abilities on the battlefield.

“No clue what you’re talking about. Didn’t you come here to talk about the ninth match?”

“I...I know that Lucnoca the Winter needs to be d-defeated at some point. But! This is...this is a match! Lucnoca is coming here tomorrow, believing this is a serious duel to the death!”

“It’s a match, sure. The Sixways Exhibition isn’t some athletic event or test of strength. Minia have to use our noggins if we’re going to battle against monsters like Lucnoca the Winter. If we end

up losing despite that, then we'll gracefully accept defeat, just like anyone else. Why do the weak have to go along with how the strong do things before the fight even begins?"

"Right...right. Everyone says that. Not just you, Tuturi... Rosclay, the other Twenty-Nine Officials, they all say...tricking the enemy, trapping them with words and rules, claiming this is minian cleverness, true strength... That this is the only way weak minia can fight..."

Qwell's large eyes looked at Tuturi through her bangs.

They seemed sorrowful and tinged with melancholy, even more than usual.

"Why doesn't everyone try to grow stronger?"

"What did you say?"

"...I—I wonder. Maybe minia...are innately weaker than dwarves, ogres, and dragons. But everyone's given up entirely on overcoming their weakness...y-yet even then, they want to win, so then they win in ways a lot more vulgar, far crueler, than their opponent...sw-switching around the meaning of strength to do so...! I-it's not just their enemy either... Th-they just...just keep deceiving themselves the whole time, don't they?!"

It was the first time Tuturi had seen the horribly cowardly and inarticulate Qwell be so talkative about anything.

Clearly, she must have held this dissatisfaction in her the whole time. Ever since they decided on the regulations behind the Sixways Exhibition. Since Rosclay was made to be an artificial champion. All of it aimed toward the way that strength existed among this race of people, the minia.

"That's not what real strength is! Why can't any of you...pay any respect to the champions, to Psianop, to Lucnoca the Winter... who are putting their lives on the line?! Being powerful, growing strong, it's all something much... much nobler than any of you think it is!"

"If we don't engineer Lucnoca's defeat, Psianop's going to die!"

Tuturi slammed the desk. It wasn't done in a fit of intense emotion, but it was a feigned threat to make Qwell shrink back—rationally, Tuturi felt that was how it was supposed to be.

"Qwell, everything you're going on about? It's animal logic! If some monster shows up that you can't best in a test of strength, then the weak are supposed to just shut up and lose, is that it?! Is the monster gonna wait while we gather hundreds of thousands of

people who can't fight and make them all get stronger?! We gotta win *now*, no matter how low we have to go to do it! Why don't you get it...?! I'm talking about making sure we all survive, here! We don't want Psianop to die a meaningless death either, you know!"

"Psianop isn't going to die!" Qwell shouted. "Psianop...will win! He's not going to lose to someone like Lucnoca the Winter! S-so, I...I'm not going to let you do any tampering! Whether it's a trap to make Psianop lose, or to make him win...! Tuturi! Dismantle all of this and leave this place! Immediately!"

"*Hah-hah*. Am I supposed to be responsible for this? For things falling apart over total nonsense like this?"

Tuturi stood up. Qwell similarly took her long-handled war ax from the floor.

They hadn't seized her weapon when they let her through—Tuturi wanted to click her tongue in annoyance, but assuming that was the case, it was difficult to imagine Qwell faced much strong resistance. Save for a few bodyguards, the lower ranks didn't know anything about the schemes regarding the assault on Qwell in the first place.

Qwell brandished her ax above her head. She was in the stance before Tuturi even noticed.

A silver cyclone ran lengthways through the desk. The hardwood desk was split in two.

Dodging to the left right before it hit, Tuturi got wrapped up in the chair next to it and collapsed magnificently to the ground. She hit her back hard. She didn't even have the time for the throbbing pain to reach her brain.

She slashed at me without a second damn thought...!

No—if Qwell really intended to kill Tuturi, then that attack would have done her in. Qwell had slashed down with enough speed *to allow Tuturi* to dodge at the last moment.

Her goal had been to force Tuturi into an unnatural dodge and make her lose her balance. With the desk broken apart in a single attack, there wasn't any sort of cover for Tuturi to run and hide behind. She planned to take Tuturi hostage and use her to negotiate.

Almost simultaneously with Tuturi's thoughts, several gunshots rang from outside the tent.

One shot hit the war ax and bounced off. The rest missed.

"From outside. You were making them aim for my shadow."

Qwell's line of sight matched the height of Tuturi's even as she was collapsed on the ground. With Qwell's legs opened wide, she was in a low pose, almost touching the floor.

Tuturi had set guards outside the tent just to be safe, but Qwell had seen through the tactic. From her very first attack, she had taken the firefight into account with her movements.

At the same time, three bodyguards rushed into the tent. Readying their short spears, they charged.

"...!"

Qwell instead stepped toward the spears.

As she stepped forward, she slightly dropped her center of gravity two levels. The spear blade had definitely hit Qwell's shoulder, but the roundness of her shoulder bone reflected it away. An extremely precise manipulation of her body, without even a scratch left behind.

When the soldiers attempted to cope with the shift in the fighting range, Qwell took her hand off her war ax.

Instantly, she wrapped both of her arms around the soldier's torso, rushed forward with him in her grip, and used him to mow down the other two.

"Hi-yah!"

The move resembled what was known in the wrestling of the Beyond as a body takedown. The points that differed were that the goal of the move wasn't to pull her opponent down to the ground, but to crush their backbone with the strength of her fingers the instant she wrapped both arms around her opponent's body. Then she took the body of the soldier she had dragged down and threw it at the feet of the soldiers next to her. From there, right after she had knocked them off balance, she used simple blows to knock the two soldiers unconscious.

Her innate physical abilities, and the techniques of the Beyond that Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation had passed down to her.

Even her initial step forward might have been the same footless way that Psianop had utilized in the first match. In any case, Tuturi didn't get the sense her eyes would be able to accurately track such speed.

"...Hah-hah, Qwell."

A dry laugh slipped out. Tuturi barely managed to grab the short spear that came rolling over to her.

Would she be able to win with a weapon of her own? With a

strategy of her own?

“You really are a monster, huh?”

Publicly, Aureatia upheld true equal rights for all races. However, there were only minia among the ranks of the Twenty-Nine Officials...except for Qwell the Wax Flower.

Qwell picked up her war ax and pointed it at Tuturi, who was lying on the ground.

Her eyes, gleaming silver and unlike any minia, stared down over Tuturi.

“Tuturi. Please stop attempting this foul play.”

“I-I’ll...give you a final warning, too. If you plan on going any further than this, you’re going to leave me no choice but to do something truly awful...”

Although Tuturi was buying herself time, there were no gunshots from outside the tent. It was extremely likely that a stray bullet would hit Tuturi in this situation if the guards relied on silhouettes to aim, and if they came into the tent they’d just end up like the soldiers from before... In other words, it was time for them to call in more reliable support.

“T-Tuturi...!”

Qwell grabbed Tuturi by the scruff of her neck and lifted her up.

Qwell was a younger woman than herself, with slender arms. Nevertheless, Tuturi’s strength was no match.

“Tuturi... You know what you’re doing is wrong, too, don’t you?!”

Her silver eyes were looking at Tuturi at point-blank range.

...I don’t know.

Winning in a fair fight—

Obviously, anyone would prefer that if it was possible.

However, that was a luxury only given to those who were monstrously strong from birth.

Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam, Aureatia’s Twenty-First General. She was a military officer, but she had only been personally involved in a handful of fights to the death. Her body with its lack of muscle was exactly as it appeared to be. She wasn’t proficient with weapons, either.

“Qwell. See me? I’m the type that, if I say I’m gonna do something, I seriously go through with it...”

“I’m sorry, Tuturi. I’m taking you hostage.”

“...All right then... I’ll put away any of the cheap tricks. Just like you want, Qwell... We’ll have a one-on-one fight...fair and square...”

“...?”

Tuturi could understand why Qwell looked so suspicious as she held Tuturi firmly in her grip.

It must have seemed like she was proposing a contest she had no hopes of winning.

However, *Tuturi never said she would be the one* to fight.

Before anyone could notice him, an elderly man, bending his tall, thin body, ducked inside the tent.

“Is it time for me to step in, Tuturi? I thought I’d be able to take the day off today, too...”

“...!”

“*Hah-hah*. You’re fine with this, right? Just like you wanted, Qwell: a fair, one-on-one fight...”

Hidow the Clamp. Viga the Clamor.

These weren’t the only talented individuals who had been extracted from Rosclay’s camp.

The man was a broken failure to begin with, having lost any hints of loyalty or conviction.

His round, scholarly glasses looked at Qwell.

“Hmm. Very easy.”

Member of the First Party. Romzo the Star Map.



The story came from sometime during his travels with the First Party.

He had been asked if oozes even experienced sleep.

At the time, Psianop had said that they did. At least, Psianop had experienced what he perceived as “sleep” several times before, and naturally thought this was the same sensation that the minian races experienced.

However, according to what Alena and Romzo would tell him, it seemed that their sleep was different.

Their sleep was believed to occur in order to rest their nerve cell organ, called a “brain,” and sleep for Psianop, lacking any defined nerve cells, didn’t cause him to completely lose

consciousness.



“For example, Psianop, when you’re asleep, what if something moving crossed close beside you? You could immediately wake up and react to it, yes?”

Romzo pointed this out to him. The conversation happened on a roadway on the border of the Central Kingdom and the True Northern Kingdom.

“Well yes, of course I could...”

“Most of the minian races can’t do that. They go completely unconscious.”

“Huh?! Honestly, is that really even possible? Suddenly losing all your senses despite having no issues with your body functions? That’s so unnatural! Even if you’re trying to rest your body, if an enemy came to attack you, then it’d be all over, wouldn’t it?”

“Hmm. It’s a good question. When I was studying in the Kingdom, I also heard that we don’t fully know why sleep is necessary in the first place.”

“Completely defenseless, night in and night out, without even knowing why? More irrational than an ooze.”

Unlike tarantulas and mandrakes, beastfolk with forms largely divergent from normal creatures—such as oozes and chimeras—were, in fact, extremely unnatural life-forms.

Some even advanced a theory that the constructs created by a self-proclaimed demon king far in the past had developed the ability to leave behind offspring, eventually becoming established creatures in the wild.

Many oozes would die without ever knowing that. Since they were separated from the lineage of common organisms, some couldn’t even comprehend bestial instincts. Psianop wouldn’t have had any reason to know, himself, if he hadn’t traveled with Romzo and the others.

“What are you thinking about...when you sleep, Romzo? If you lose all your senses...do you just sit there in total darkness and only decide when you can wake up?”

“Hmm. I don’t think about anything when I’m sleeping.”

“You’re lying.”

Even Romzo, who came off as extremely intellectual and trustworthy, would still tease the other party members. Psianop thought this was another one of those moments.

"You caught a bug that flew near your face while you were still sleeping, right? I've seen it happen before."

"Quite a close observer, hmm? But that's actually because I wasn't fully asleep. In my case, I keep just one section of my brain awake when I sleep. It's not an easy technique to manage, so even a talented man like Alena would still need a year or so of practice to do it, I'd say. Could take a bit longer than that, even."

"No way. Even a skilled master like you can't win out against sleep, Romzo?"

"Hmm. Suppose so," Romzo answered with his usual, artless way of speaking.

Psianop felt something inscrutable about the way he answered, as if it was all such a natural fact of life.

The concept of something that even powerful people like Romzo or Alena couldn't hope to defeat, that stole their ability to think, from Psianop's perspective, sounded unbelievably powerful. Considering that it would assail all of the minian races without exception, he felt it was something that needed to be conquered just as much as the True Demon King, and yet, they all seemed to readily accept the fact they couldn't win against sleep, and if anything, found it pleasing.

Why was that?

"This is what I'm trying to get at, Psianop. You may think that an ooze's strengths are inferior, but something you've achieved from birth is a feat that only someone who's completely mastered a certain technique can accomplish. Not only you, but a certain part of soulless beasts can do the same. Plants and animals all have their own outstanding abilities and possess possibilities that common minian understanding can't even imagine."

"*Heh-heh-heh*, you really think so?" Psianop candidly grew bashful.

It was only natural, but his journey with Romzo and the others always brought them to minian towns. Just by being an ooze, a weak and unintelligent race, he would quite often be looked down on, but his companions never once overlooked any unfair treatment against him, and he was glad they always treated him like an equal.

"Romzo. What do you think I need to do to sleep like the minian races? I feel like if I can experience that strange sensation for myself, I might be able to better understand their thoughts and feelings."

“Good question. That’s almost like us thinking up a way to sleep like an ooze, but... there is one easy method to do so.”

Putting up his index finger, Romzo jokingly smiled.

“Dying. Death and sleep are really very similar. If you even get to meet Neft the Nirvana again, you might want to ask him about it.”

“Don’t say scary stuff like that.”

However, perhaps it was a good idea to try asking him someday.

A slightly cheerful mood came over Psianop.

“...”

Psianop, “awakening” from his memories of the past, looked up at the starry expanse outside the window.

Oozes would also have dreams while they rested that seemed to blend sensations of past memories together, but as for whether he was simply recalling memories of the past, or if this was some sort of effect caused by possessing a heart with Word Arts, the matter was even more of a mystery to him than the minian races were.

...Romzo. I’ve slept several times since then.

The break in consciousness he experienced when he first read one of the cursed tomes in the Sand Labyrinth, as if time had been torn out of him, had been a horribly frightening sensation.

Over the twenty years of intense training and combat he struggled through, he had been wounded heavily enough to lose consciousness. The average ooze would have simply died from it, so Psianop was likely the only one to continue living after experiencing that sensation of loss.

During his fight with Neft the Nirvana and Toroa the Awful, he had also caught a glimpse of death.

Both of those experiences were far from the peaceful and tranquil sleep that Romzo had talked about. Even now, I can’t understand how Neft had been able to befriend death like he did.

Perhaps, the next day, he would come to understand.

Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation was going to fight Lucnoca the Winter.

Every time he saw the border of life and death right before his eyes—one far more terrifying than anything he saw during his journey with the First Party, or his time spent inside the Sand Labyrinth—Psianop would also recall the silly conversations about

sleep from long ago.

In the past, Psianop had considered minian sleep to be absolutely terrifying, but at this point, he thought maybe that wasn't the case after all.

They were *practicing* death from birth.

That was why they didn't fear danger like oozes did. They were able to beautifully meet their final moment.

Just as Psianop had been learning the masters' techniques from birth, perhaps it was because they slept that the minian races were able to grow truly strong.

In that case, does Lucnoca the Winter sleep, too?

Maybe he would actually try asking her.

At the end of battle, would a peaceful sleep someday visit him?



The sound of controlled breathing. The sound of footsteps trying to open up space or to step forward to close it.

Tuturi stared out at the noisy battle, reverberating across the frozen night in the Mali Wastes, as if it didn't concern her at all.

In fact, it was now becoming entirely someone else's concern.

"Aaah... Ah!"

Qwell the Wax Flower swung her colossal war ax down. A beautiful path through the air. Even a grazing wound would have been enough to sever an arm or two, Tuturi thought.

"Hmm. Not bad."

However, this slash failed to strike the unarmed master, Romzo the Star Map.

This wasn't only true of this slash. It had been the same way from the very start.

More than that, the calm elderly man—his features almost scholarly with his round glasses—seemed not to move whatsoever among the silver tempest of devastating ax slashes.

In actuality, he was moving. Just by separating himself ever so slightly, less than half a step, closing in or shifting his center, he was evading Qwell's lethal slashes. Though it appeared he was gently bringing his palm up against the side of the downward swinging blade, she'd trip over her footing, lose her balance, gradually exhausting her physical stamina.

“...!”

“Now, this goes back quite a number of years, but...I’ve never trained a disciple to use a heavy weapon.”

While chatting in an unsophisticated manner, he casually began to close the distance.

As if pushed back by an unseen barrier between them, Qwell shifted back and wasn’t able to deliver a counterattack.

The master’s technique was unfathomable to the ordinary eye. Without even sending out a punch, he made his opponent conscious of his attack. When his enemy would think up a response to this attack, he would shift his center of gravity to meet their counterattack. By suppressing any and all choices, he could ensure his foe could do nothing but back away.

“Because it’s hard. The heavier and more powerful a weapon, the more the recoil will harm you if it’s not wielded correctly. It becomes hard to teach once you know a little interference is all it needs. In other words, with my steps just now, I attacked your right shoulder and right thigh, but...it must have given you a nasty sprain, right?”

Even his matter-of-fact comments continued pressuring Qwell into a corner.

Despite the extreme cold, pained sweat dribbled down from Qwell’s long bangs.

Tuturi grandiosely clapped her hands.

“C’mon now! Give it all you got, Qwell!” she heartlessly shouted. Tuturi was displeased.

The moment Qwell endured the first barrage of gunshots and brought down the guards who rushed in, she should have had plenty of opportunities. After securing Tuturi as a hostage, Qwell could’ve simply killed her on the spot.

However, when Romzo appeared, he had attacked Qwell *as well as her hostage, Tuturi*, without any sign of hesitation.

Qwell instantly cast Tuturi aside and fought back. In that second, Qwell had assigned her this level of priority.

...Way too naive. What about that is supposed to be strength?

Hypothetically, even if Qwell had known Romzo the Star Map was a broken man who wouldn’t hesitate to kill his own ally—the man was, at the same time, a master of hand-to-hand combat. He could devise a trick to make it look like he was threatening to kill Qwell and her hostage, and instead allow the hostage to get free.

Qwell should have presumed as much.

Tuturi was annoyed because she knew all of that.

If Qwell hadn't taken her hand off Tuturi, she definitely would have been killed.

"Hey now, don't try to rest! You were the one who wanted an honest fight, weren't you?!"

"Haah, haah... gahak, ngh..."

"Hm. I bet you'd like to take a breather, yes?"

"No..."

"I'm sure you don't."

"—!"

The blade of her ax was stuck in the ground.

At that exact moment, Qwell had stepped forward. Like earlier, when she had jumped into the midst of the soldiers' short spears, she abandoned her weapon, hurling her body at lightning-fast speed, searching for a way out of a desperate situation. Psianop's footless way.

"Whoops."

There was a snap.

Romzo's body, which had been standing on the ground moments prior, made a half-rotation, whirling in the air. It almost seemed like he had been sent flying by Qwell's violent charge forward, but that wasn't the case.

Qwell, who made the attack, was the one to collapse on the spot and let out a moan.

Appearing as if he would fall upside down, Romzo opened his legs and landed on his feet with unbelievable flexibility.

Only Romzo the Star Map himself was able to explain what happened in the instantaneous clash.

He had intercepted the body slam, aimed at his thighs, with the back of his foot. Using Qwell's collarbone as a jumping-off point, he leapt into the air—a move that was nigh impossible unless he had both an abnormal amount of flexibility and a firm knee joint to reciprocate, working together.

Without question, Romzo of the First Party knew a more effective way of dealing with the attack, such as thrusting his arm into her side, throwing a foot behind her, and crushing her. He was testing out acrobatic moves against the Qwell the Wax Flower, the strongest woman among Aureatia's Twenty-Nine Officials.

This guy's toying with the damn girl.

"Now then, how was that? Your collarbone's completely broken. You may still have some chance left, though."

"Ungh, ngh... sniff, sniff..."

Qwell was crying. As she cried, she began tottering backward like a baby.

Tuturi understood that the tears weren't from the pain, but from frustration and shame.

"I have taught how one should fight with both arms obstructed before. Of course, kicks become the core of your technique, though. You've got a long-hilted weapon, so that'll be perfect. You can use it just by sticking it between your neck and shoulder."

Once again, he began to casually close the distance.

Fighting techniques so far removed from any other could upend the racial disparities between minia and dhampir. Though he was growing old, this man was still the same as Neft, the same as Izick, the same as Psianop—a member of the First Party.

"Hmm. For a normal minia, it wouldn't be out of the question for that first light sprain at the beginning to leave you dead on the spot. Is it because you're a dhampir, or because of your well-honed body? I'd like to see a bit more."

"Okay, listen, Mr. Romzo..." Tuturi went to call out to him but stopped.

She could see it from her vantage point. The war ax that Qwell had previously stuck in the ground was in her shadow as Romzo continued stepping in toward her.

Qwell can't use her arms anymore.

Romzo was remaining aware of kicks. His comments just now had actually announced clearly what he was staying on guard against. A kicking counterattack. Weapon martial arts using her neck and shoulder...

But if she uses her feet.

The instant that Romzo arrived in front of Qwell—

She took a single step backward.

The pommel of the war ax stuck in the ground.

In the Beyond, it was called a "stomp."

The blade, flying up into the air without warning, aimed right at Romzo's chin—

"Hmm."

Yet he wasn't cleaved in two. Laying his wrists across each other, Romzo guarded against the blazingly fast blade.

By some unknown function of his block, the only thing severed where the blade hit him was a single layer of glove.

“Thought up an interesting strategy there, but let me tell you something.”

The hopeless gap in abilities brought both schemes and even weapons themselves into submission.

“It’s not an effective strategy. That’s called *false intellect*.”

A finger attack with Romzo’s thumb dug into the back of Qwell’s left hand.

A shout of intense pain.

“*Eeaugh! Nrgh!*”

“Hmm.”

Romzo the Star Map’s techniques drove into the pressure points on the body.

Just getting hit with a single one of these attacks would render someone unable to continue fighting.

“Well then. How much of this will you endure?”

“*Augh...*”

“It’s my first time actually trying this on a dhampir’s body.”

“*Angh, gahak, auugh, grnng—!*”

Each time one of his fingers poked into her, Qwell’s slender silhouette would jump, as if she was dancing.

Her breathing grew shallow and ragged, like a dying patient. The sound of her ligaments tearing from her own writhing.

Eventually, she grew unable to stay sitting at all. Nor could she lie down.

The equilibrium of her body was slowly destroyed, like a child’s building blocks crumbling away.

Another attack, then another—

“*...Ngh...! ...!*”

“There we go. All done.”

At the end of his act of destruction, seeking to test the limits of the dhampir’s body, Romzo’s hands finally stopped.

Aureatia’s Tenth General Qwell—prided as being the strongest in hand-to-hand combat among all the Twenty-Nine—had her muscles, organs, and bones all mercilessly trampled over, and was left lying on the frozen soil.

Tuturi simply watched as it all happened, up until the end.

“True, you’re similar to a vampire, but you feel a bit different to the touch. Tuturi. What do I do from here?”

“Hmm...good question.”

Like hell there's anything more to do, Tuturi inwardly thought.

“What about you, Qwell? Fine with that?”

Tuturi crouched down right in front of Qwell and asked as shallowly as she could.

Tuturi was a weakling. She didn't have any strength to fight on her own, and she hadn't even lifted a finger.

“*Angh...augh...*”

“See, Qwell, fighting fair and square, with pure strength alone? Well, in the end, this is how it ends up. Nooobody comes to help you when someone stronger runs roughshod over you. You can't upset anything. Is this what the ‘true strength’ of yours is supposed to be, Qwell? Minia aren't animals. We gotta fight like minia.”

“...”

Teary, sorrowful eyes were the only thing gazing back at Tuturi.

Tuturi let out an irritated sigh. She couldn't deal with it any longer.

“Okey dokey then, I'd say that settles that discussion, wouldn't you?”

Tuturi vigorously clapped her hands. The ninth match was tomorrow. She had plenty of other things that she needed to take care of. Given that the weak were going to slay the strong, she could prepare all sorts of different cowardly traps and it still wouldn't be enough.

“Go ahead and kill her, Romzo.”

“Fine, I suppose. Truly simple.”

“...*Unh, nghh.*”

Qwell the Wax Flower was grabbed by the back of her neck and lifted up as if she was a cloth-made stuffed toy.

Among Aureatia's Twenty-Nine Officials, she may have been the only one who tried to preserve the just and correct true duel. She might have wanted the purity of ultimate strength.

“N-no...”

However, there wasn't a single person who believed in such a thing other than her.

Qwell the Wax Flower shouted like a child.

“...Nooo! I—I don't...I don't want a wretched death like this! *Hick, augh...* I—I don't want this to be the last thing I see! Th-the ideal I've b-believed in until now, it wasn't anything l-like this brute force and violence! I don't, I don't want to die...!”

“Hah-hah, that’s a great plea for your life.”

Tuturi laughed dryly. The worst possible plea for mercy.

“But I told you at the start, didn’t I...? With me...” She told Qwell with a smile.

From the start, what she had to do never changed.

“If I say I’m going to do something, I’m gonna seriously go through with it, see. Kill her.”

“No...!”

Crack, snap. With these sounds, Qwell’s head was snapped back to below her shoulder.

Both thighs violently kicked and struggled, but this was nothing but a postmortem nerve reflex.

Tuturi looked at her face, thrown down to the ground like a wooden figure. Behind the bangs, it was sloppy and wet, as if it had been soaked in water. All of it was from her tears.

“...Well then.”

Tuturi nodded at Qwell’s dead face.

Now this wouldn’t be any problem.

“Send Qwell’s body over to the National Defense Research Institute. Be careful with it now, got it? The bone marrow of a single dhampir can be used to make around two thousand doses of the corpse treatment serum.”

She immediately gave orders to her bodyguards, a cheerful tone in her voice.

Once that was finished and the corpse was taken out of her sight, the unpleasant thoughts would disappear with it.

She would be able to remain her usual flippant and irresponsible self, without thinking about anything.

“Well then. Should we have really killed her? She was still one of the Twenty-Nine Officials.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. At the end of the day, the regime’s going to change from here, anyway. Hell, we gotta straighten out the current Twenty-Nine Officials as it is. There’s too many, don’t you think?”

“Hmm. What I’m worried about is Psianop. By killing Qwell, won’t it be hard to secure his cooperation?”

“It’s the day before the match. Unless someone finds the body, she’ll just be labeled missing, that’s all. If Psianop’s going to depart Aureatia in time for the start of the match, he won’t have any time to try visiting her in the hospital before he leaves. We won’t let him find out.”

They only needed to use Psianop for his fight with Lucnoca the Winter. After that, even if he managed to find out the truth by some means, the entire situation would have changed by then.

“We were going to need Qwell to die in secret at some point either way. If this vampire infection is spreading this much, then the corpse treatment serum is definitely going to be necessary as a political ace up our sleeve. Besides, even if this pushes back the plans to overthrow Aureatia...this means that Psianop’s lost his sponsor. Right?”

“Which would mean that Haade’s hero candidate, Soujirou the Willow Sword, would win by default.”

“Exaaactly. All that’s left is to take care of Rosclay, and Soujirou’s clinched a spot in the finals.”

Whether things continued, or they all turned tail, *there was no harm in killing her.*

Ultimately, that was the sole reason that Qwell the Wax Flower died.

Tuturi had no ill will against her, nor was she angry at her at all. She always carried out her work matter-of-factly.

“So, my time will come during that match with Rosclay, then? You plan on doing this to me after you beat Rosclay?”

“Oh, please, nooo! You’re not a hero candidate or a sponsor, right? Killing you would be pointless. You worry too much, seriously! Besides, you’re not in any position to worry about that this late in the game, are you?”

This man had attempted to openly kill Tuturi. He understood his position perfectly.

Tuturi smiled genially and smacked Romzo on the back.

“We should go forward like the villains we are, right?”



The ninth match would kick off the second round of the Sixways Exhibition.

Yet, at the arena for the match—the Mali Wastes—there were no signs of spectators.

The situation was unacceptable for true duel royal games, where the eyes of the citizens stood as proof of victory. However, given the results of the second match nearly annihilating all the

spectators with it, and Alus's assault on the city right before, Aureatia decided to cancel any spectating of the ninth match.

There were many opposing voices, mainly from the merchants who handled the audience ticket sales, but with the interests of two major factions of the Aureatia Assembly—Rosclay's camp and Haade's camp—aligned to slay Lucnoca during the ninth match, the voices raising their objections would be smothered before long.

There was another small change as well.

The start of the match wasn't set for noon, but for sunset instead.

This was completely unknown to the people. First, the Aureatia Assembly informed Psianop of this beforehand, and then it was conveyed to Lucnoca during the negotiations at Igania Ice Lake.

In order for the citizenry or Aureatia's hero candidates to make it to the Mali Wastes by noon, they would need to set out the day before, as had been the case for the second and seventh matches. It wouldn't be entirely abnormal if anyone noticed the change, given the circumstances.

However, this start time was also part of the plan to subjugate Lucnoca the Winter.

The first reason was so that if there were any *people independently looking to watch the match* heading out to the Mali Wastes on their own, or if they were unable to wholly deal with the anti-Aureatia forces looking into the circumstances behind the duel, this change would ensure that such people wouldn't witness the operation to take Lucnoca down. All they would lay eyes on would be the barren, empty Mali Wastes at noontime, and until the match actually started, the plan was to have Tuturi's squad either send them packing with some on-the-spot explanation or dispose of them in some manner.

The second reason was for tactical benefit. While a dragon's night vision was still far more powerful than any of the minian races, even then, when compared to midday, it still became harder for them to get their sights on their target, just like minia. It was to conceal, as much as possible, the *elaborate squad* that had been deployed across all areas of the Mali Wastes while they set about their grand attack against Lucnoca the Winter.

Lights illuminated various places around the vast Mali Wastes and encircled the battlefield where the two combatants would face off. However, this, too, was simply a measure to conceal the gambit

amidst the darkness.

Lucnoca the Winter descended into this twilight land.

“So Harghent really isn’t here, is he?”

Looking over the area, her eyes stopped on a small minia.

He must have looked quite a bit different from Harghent.

“Ahh, yes, um... I’m sorry. What was your name again?”

“Eighteenth Minister Quewai the Moon Fragment,” Quewai gloomily replied.

The outcome of their negotiations at Igania Ice Lake had named him Lucnoca’s sponsor in Sixth General Harghent’s stead, but regardless of who it was, for this match, they needed one of the Twenty-Nine Officials belonging to Haade’s camp to control the information given to Lucnoca.

“I see. Right, that’s what it was. I’m counting on you, too, Quewai.”

Lucnoca’s marble eyes looked down on Quewai’s diminutive figure.

As a singular living creature, she was all too grand, all too beautiful.

Her silvery-white scales, reflecting and sparkling in the evening sun, had been largely chipped off just around the base of her throat. Thanks to the wound she had received, Quewai could see the dragon’s skin, with a massive, dark red burn scar left behind.

Her tail was cut off halfway down—another wound delivered by Alus the Star Runner.

Quewai recalled the dragon-slaying operation Harghent had attempted.

She’s completely different from Vikeon the Smoldering.

The more ancient and powerful a dragon was, the more they loathed any disgrace or injury.

Their swollen pride as the strongest of all races didn’t allow for any cracks in their integrity.

This wasn’t true of Lucnoca the Winter.

Is she not embarrassed at all to be so heavily wounded?

The scar from her battle to the death, hideously carved into her exquisite body, seemed like something that should not be, as though taboo or immoral. Even when he tried to look at it directly, he couldn’t help averting his eyes.

Despite it all, Lucnoca the Winter was still beautiful.

“Now, what was my next opponent’s name again? I would like

to remember it, if possible.”

“Psianop the Inexhaustive Stagnation. An ooze martial artist. He uses fighting techniques from the Beyond.”

“Is he really an ooze? I wonder how he will fight, then. Ah, I’m so excited... I’m sure he must be stronger than Alus the Star Runner, right?”

Quewai’s perception was that the ooze couldn’t possibly hold a candle.

When compared to Alus the Star Runner—having pressed the most powerful existence in the land, Lucnoca the Winter, into a true *life-or-death struggle*, and becoming a calamity that threatened Aureatia itself on top of that—most of the other hero candidates were insignificant and ephemeral.

“I believe I’ve encountered numerous experts on the techniques of the Beyond before. Why, some among them might have been very strong, too... *Uhoo, hoo-hoo-hoo!*”

She laughed in high spirits, appearing to have remembered something.

The “experts” of techniques from the Beyond she mentioned could only refer to one thing. Visitors.

To the champion-slaying legend, even visitors—feared as destroyers of order, who deviated from their world’s natural law—were simply people that *she vaguely remembered challenging her at some point*, and nothing more.

“...Forgive me for putting a damper on your expectations, however...”

As he spoke, Quewai operated the calcurite in his hands.

Quewai had done the same thing when they had talked to Lucnoca at Igania Ice Lake.

He could only manage to shut out everything else when he was focusing on numbers. He was able to remain unafraid. Remain undaunted. In the field of negotiations, Quewai was worse than more or less every other minia in the world, but if he possessed one strength that Tuturi lacked, it would have been this.

“As we previously informed you, Aureatia is currently facing a massive disaster, and we are unable to arrange a proper arena for the match.”

“Oh, is that so? Here I was convinced that the other one you had with you...*Uhoo-hoo-hoo*, that she was merely pulling my leg.”

Lucnoca laughed. She had interpreted it as a jest, after all.

However, that was a good thing. If Lucnoca the Winter looked at him with true suspicion in her eyes, regardless of his great talent to still his thoughts, Quewai would have been rendered unable to say another word.

“The disaster we mentioned could potentially show itself here in the Mali Wastes as well. With that in mind, some matches have been suspended.”

“Is that so?” Lucnoca quietly replied.

However, the temperature included in her suppressed laugh cooled slightly.

Lucnoca could get some sense of the true meaning behind Quewai’s words by looking out to see the Mali Wastes’ current state. There were marks completely unrelated to Lucnoca’s breath, previously turning the land into tundra—destruction boring deep into the soil, like craters from a meteorite impact, here and there, with some of them even fragmenting the topography itself.

This destruction was caused by Mele the Horizon’s Roar during the seventh match, but without hearing anything about the circumstances of the first round, Lucnoca had no way of knowing the truth.

“That’s...” Lucnoca laughed, bringing up one of her wings to her mouth to hide it. “...quite a problem, isn’t it? Isn’t there something you could do *to let Psianop fight?*”

“All we can do is start the match according to regulations.”

He turned the calcurite. It was downright astounding that he was able to converse with Lucnoca the Winter this much. The fact seemed like it didn’t concern him, his consciousness detached from the real world.

“The arena will be that level ground surrounded by lights over there. Fireworks will launch right as the sun sets. Please begin the match once you see that signal.”

Quewai pointed west from the hill he was currently standing on.

Carved up by Lucnoca and Mele’s destruction in addition to the countless fissures that split open the earth, this section within the Mali Wastes had formed a type of basin set one level lower than its surroundings with a relatively flat stretch of land left behind inside it.

The region was picked to dress up as the arena in order to encircle Lucnoca the Winter.

The fighting conditions for the Sixways Exhibition were determined with both parties' consent.

However, everything involving the ninth match was advancing forward as a purely military operation, without Lucnoca or Psianop's intentions being involved at all.

Lucnoca looked up at the sky like a daydreaming young girl.

"Look. Night's coming, Quewai. Exciting, isn't it?"

"...Exciting?"

The golden color, like a flame burning the heavens, slowly tinged with blue as it headed up to the sky's zenith.

A thin belt of yellowish green. Darkening blue. Then, the deep navy of the night sky.

"I have a feeling...that yet another splendid thing is going to happen tonight."



Lucnoca the Winter landed in the arena and waited for Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation.

The edge of the setting sun was about to reach the horizon, but there was still some time until it had set completely.

For Lucnoca, having yearned for so long to battle against strong foes, this period of waiting for her opponent to arrive was nothing.

The sound of the wind. The sound of sand.

Even the breathing of the minia that were supposed to be watching the start of the match faded away within the vast space.

The Mali Wastes, the land of nothingness, was simply quiet.

"Hoo-hoo...! Uhoo-hoo-hoo...!"

Lucnoca laughed low amid the stillness.

A laugh signaling that she couldn't contain how amusing something was to her.

Leisurely shifting her gaze, she looked diagonally to her rear.

"...Oh no. And here I came all this way to fight Psianop."

"Krng, grahk!"

All of a sudden, *something* appeared, letting out a terrible growl. It had an enormous black body as large as Lucnoca the Winter's own.

Its appearance equaled hers as well.

It was a dragon-like *something*.

"Harghent told me...that you had died."

"Grlg grlg grrrgl, hiiiiiss..."

"Ohoo-hoo-hoo... Tell me just what happened for you to end up *looking like that* then?"

The ghost-like silhouette backlit by the setting sun and writhing had, at the very least, certainly been a dragon at some point.

However, its movements were bizarrely quiet.

It had black dragon scales. Clouded eyes.

Pieced together wings and a tail.

It had a disquieting scar running in a straight line through the middle of its body.

Faced with the terrible fate of her old dragon acquaintance, Lucnoca sweetly smiled.

"Vikeon the Smoldering."

A dragon, and a revenant.

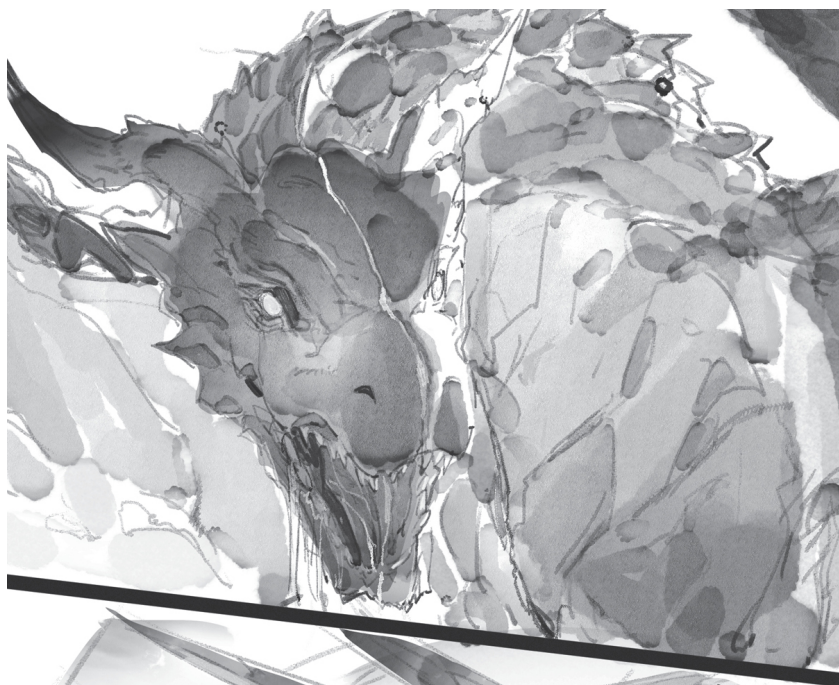


"The way I see it, it was downright strange that Alus would just leave Vikeon's body lying there, you know? A dragon corpse, now that's much rarer *material* than any enchanted sword or magic tool," a tall woman said, smiling as she sat next to Tuturi observing the battle—Viga the Clamor.

"I mean, there are still several legends we have today about dragon revenants threatening the Kingdoms of old, don't we? I think that all those probably happened."

"...You're out of your mind," Tuturi said with a sigh.

The thought had been with her since talk had started about deploying this weapon, but now that she was actually seeing it for herself, she felt once more that it was the most surreal—and most profane—creature she had ever seen.



The legendary black dragon Alus the Star Runner had cleaved down the middle, had been *patched up* and brought back to life.

As a complete and utter monster, furnished with combat functionality as a weapon and nothing more, without even a heart able to control Word Arts.

“You don’t need to worry about it.”

Viga the Clamor always had a smile on her face, and even when she squinted her eyes, there was almost no change in her expression.

“Even if that boy defeats Lucnoca, he only has a half-day life span. He’s using all of a dragon’s excess life-support functionalities entirely for combat, after all. I made sure he could carry out both of his jobs properly, killing Lucnoca, and dying himself.”

“You know, Viga... I’ve never seen anyone else think to put a time limit on a construct’s life span before.”

“Oh, wow, reaaally? Don’t you think it’s useful, though?”

Romzo the Star Map had been a terrifying villain in his own right, but when it came to Viga the Clamor, Tuturi hadn’t the slightest idea how she had been able to remain in Rosclay’s camp so calmly all this time.

The only thing she was sure of was that this woman possessed a grotesque mind, even among other self-proclaimed demon kings—a desecrator and blasphemer of life.

Her reason for changing her loyalty to the National Defense Research Institute was research. However, unlike Yukis the Ground Colony, she wasn’t motivated by financial aid. It was because she sought research that was even more *unrestricted*.

In the far-off distance, the enormous black body brandished its dragon claws.

Even this initial movement was impossible to see with minia eyes, but once the streaking flash of light came, Tuturi understood what happened.

Lucnoca the Winter counterattacked similarly with her forelegs, but perhaps due to the revenant’s unimaginable strength, she was the one who was repelled back. Her claws had been completely broken off during her intense bout with Alus the Star Runner in the second match.

“Between a minia and a revenant made from a minia’s body,

the revenant's the one that comes out on top."

Viga seemed to look upon Vikeon's sad and ruinous fate with affectionate eyes.

It was creepy.

"What about for dragons, though?"

"...Whatever the case, there's stuff that needs to get done while Lucnoca's having her fun."

Lucnoca exchanged claw blows with Vikeon on purpose.

It could only be interpreted as a sign that Lucnoca was entirely underestimating the sudden intruder.

"I'm giving this everything I've got. Even a monster like that *still* isn't enough to fully kill off Lucnoca the Winter."



When Vikeon's claws blurred, they were already slashing right toward the back of Lucnoca's neck. Instantly reacting and repelling with her right forelimb, she felt the tremendous power—abnormal by dragon standards—in her bones.

"Well now, I thought you hated to move your body and always relied on your breath."

His clouded eyes keenly sensed Lucnoca's blind spot.

He would slash at her while crawling along the ground, sometimes burrowing into it first.

Spreading out her wings, she absorbed some of the speed and deflected the attack with her right forelimb, same as before.

The force of impact was enough to bend Lucnoca's entire colossal body backward.

"*Ohoo-hoo-hoo-hoo...* You were quite strong, weren't you, Vikeon?"

"*Graaagh, grlg grlg.*"

A construct without thoughts of its own which simply rampaged about wasn't exactly a pleasing opponent, but at the very least, he reacted well to give her a good combat exchange.

She still had some time before Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation arrived—she had to admit she was the perfect tool to *kill time* with.

"*Uhoo-hoo-hoo.*"

"*Hiss.*"

Vikeon's massive frame drastically undulated.

The dirt and sand kicked up by the aftershocks of the dragon's claws had gouged the sheer bluffs encircling the two dragons.

Even though she defended against him once, he continued to attack incessantly with his dreadful and fiendish vitality, his stamina knowing no limit.

Left claw. Right claw. Left. Right.

Fangs that came up from below, just barely skimming over the ground.

Lucnoca blocked with her right forelimb. It was repelled back, and she lost her balance.

At almost the exact same moment she regained it, the next attack arrived.

Lucnoca attempted to smother the threat with a continuous flurry of light smacks to Vikeon's joints.

The surprise attack from Vikeon's fangs nearly tore off her neck, unguarded by her scales, but she interrupted it with a punch from her right forelimb that made him close his mouth.

"Oh, how troubling."

She had only used her right forelimb.

That she was able to use the same hand repelled back by Vikeon's tremendous physical strength to defend against the next attack signaled that she continued to draw her right forelimb back at more terrifying speeds than it had been repelled with.

"Last time, Alus the Star Runner didn't even let me hold back at all."

The soulless revenant was a complete puppet of his creator.

Without recognizing the gap in their strength, and without any fear, he sent out the attack using his bizarre body movements once more.

The claw attacks from the strongest race in the world, a body lacking both organs and a brain, forced together like a machine with a sole purpose.

It let out no voice. Instead, there was the shockwave of the sound barrier being broken.

...Lucnoca the Winter casually brushed off Vikeon's full power attack.

The concussive sound quaked across the Mali Wastes.

The tremor was simply the shockwave from Vikeon traveling through the surrounding air with a delay. However...

“Gwack, Grreeaaaauuugh?!”

Vikeon’s leg was bent backward in the wrong direction.

His head wasn’t facing Lucnoca, either.

Broken black fragments were scattered over the frozen ground. The dragon scales from Vikeon’s leg.

Lucnoca the Winter’s claws, lightly brushing off the attack, still managed to overpower Vikeon’s strengthened revenant might with the impact from the blow to his forearm being enough to *twist and break* the bones in his arm, his spine, and even his neck.

“...Oh heavens.”

Lucnoca laughed.

The silver body, framed in the shimmering light of the evening sun, was dark as a shadow.

“And here I made sure only to *pat you a little*.”

“Glrngh, gwack.”

Vikeon’s body, rendered unable to fight with a single attack, shivered with a creak.

His completely crushed arm writhed bizarrely and began to regain its shape.

A drool-like mucus began to overflow from his split-open jaw.

Normally, a revenant lacking normal biological activity would never have possessed regenerative abilities, but—

“Oh!”

Lucnoca turned right to look—up toward the sky.

It was a lightning strike.

In a straight line from directly above her, its path pierced right through the wound on her neck.

It couldn’t possibly be natural lightning. Not with its dark bloodred flash, its almost artificially precise aim, nor its devastating power.

A straight burn was gouged into the skin on her nape, unprotected by her dragon scales.

While she had evaded a direct hit at the last moment, the ground where the unknown missile had landed was greatly cracked, sunken in, and destroyed. The footing she needed to fight was thrown into disarray.

Finished with his mysterious regeneration, Vikeon began to writhe once more.

An invisible gas filled with bacteria was misting up from the ground.



“So, that’s the Lightning Flute.”

Even from where she stood, Tuturi could confirm the effect of the long-ranged attack from up in the sky.

“You weren’t all talk, Sindikar... A direct shot can definitely bring down a dragon. A real nightmare weapon...”

An artificially made magic tool of instant death had been developed by Sindikar the Ark after he had devoted many years solely to Force Arts research.

Far surpassing the Cold Star when it came to midrange destructive force and possibly on par with the sniper fire of Mele the Horizon’s Roar.

“...How could that possibly miss its mark, though?”

Although the shots were coming from the unstable Craft Golem, given the properties of the *trick* they were using, it was impossible to believe the shot missed. In other words, Lucnoca had dodged the Lightning Flute *after* it fired.

“Well, well... Lucnoca the Winter is quite strong after all, now, isn’t she?”

Viga the Clamor’s calm tone remained unchanged.

“Will that have an effect on Vikeon’s operational time limit at all?”

“Time wise, I think there won’t be a problem. The regeneration of his body tissue’s done completely via parasitic fungus and all. But the muscles and bones that get destroyed will always end up weaker after they’ve regenerated. Looking at him, I don’t think we can expect much from him in a direct fight.”

“...We’re not using him to actually win this for us.”

The revenant, created from the body of the legendary black dragon, possessed the strength to lay waste to a nation, and it yet still did not seem enough to keep Lucnoca at bay.

In actuality, though, it was fulfilling one of the most important roles of all.

“The most important point of all *is to make sure we don’t let her fly*. Even though, to Lucnoca, this is like an adult fighting a child, it should still be hard for her to kick off from the crumbling grounding into the air while she’s dealing with non-stop attacks from Vikeon. Lucnoca thinks absolutely nothing of him, too, so there’s little chance of her actually taking this all seriously and

flying up in the air or using her breath attack..."

"Is there any definitive proof of that?"

"...Nope. Any weird *flight of fancy* from Lucnoca, and she'll completely demolish this outlook of ours. But we have to kill her; we absolutely have to...even if it means relying on this uncertain prospect."

Losing the ninth match meant death.

Not for Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation. For Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam, and everyone in her squad.

Fortunately, Tuturi had been given every means that she could think of. She had received unrestricted permission to use what she needed, going beyond Haade's jurisdiction to include what was essentially Iriolde's private army, the National Defense Research Institute.

She recalled the pretend wars she would play out in her youth.

Tuturi's family tried to distance her from such amusements, and they never bought a single one of the toys she wanted. She continued to make her own armies fight her enemies' armies within her imagination.

Now, just this once, Tuturi was awash with toys at her disposal.

Every single one, without exception, was the most luxurious toy of all, and on top of that, all totally real.

However, the price she had to pay was that if she lost this single bit of playtime, she would die.

I'm begging you, please work.

A red light once again raced down through the gap in the clouds. Lightning Flute.

She expected it to finish Lucnoca off for sure this time, but the dragon still continued to move.

She didn't even lift off into the air.

Absolutely everything was progressing within Tuturi's expectations for the operation, and yet Lucnoca still appeared absurdly calm and composed.

"We're still dispersing the other weapon, but send in the attack force. Have them wear their gasproof helms, and send three in at once..."

"What're you doing, Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam?"

The voice behind her made her blood run cold.

She stood up.

Before anything else, she needed to talk to Viga.

"Viga. Go to the secondary command quarters immediately."

"What...? But..."

"Now."

If Tuturi made a mistake in handling the situation, there was a chance that just being there with her would mean death.

Why, all of a sudden...did this guy show up here without any prior warning?

"I want an immediate answer. Are you the one directing all this?"

"Whoa, whoa, just wait a second here. This isn't what we arranged, Psianop..."

Similar to the traffic congestion that obstructed Ozonezma in the third match, all of the carriages to the Mali Wastes were under Haade's control. She should have already gotten a report of his arrival.

At the very least, he had caught on to the scheme at some point along the way, either before he got into the carriage, or when leaving it midway and walking the rest of the way on his own, down to pinning the location of this main command center.

...Why the hell does a damn ooze also got a sharp mind, too? Now I won't be able to control his movements by telling him this attack was an operation by Rosclay's camp anymore. What should I do...?!

This was Tuturi's error. She was being so painstakingly diligent with their operation to surround Lucnoca that she hadn't given enough attention to curb the movements of her opponent, Psianop.

"I had expected...that this was probably the case. From the beginning, you made contact with me in order to use me in your effort to eliminate Lucnoca. Am I correct in my estimation?"

Tuturi put both hands out in front of her and backed away.

"...You might be right. Look, just keep your cool here, Psianop... At the end of the day, it doesn't change what we want you to do, now, does it?"

"Put an end to this farce."

"Hah?"

The gasp hadn't slipped out due to fear.

No one else had likely realized it, but it was a laugh.

...He's saying the same thing. Looks like you really understood your mentor after all, didn't you, Qwell?

The only difference was that Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation was capable of killing Tuturi.

The distance between them was the same as it had been when they spoke in the alleyway.

A distance that made it easy for him to end her life if she misspoke.

“Okay, Psianop... Go ahead and fill me in. Is there anything at all we have to gain in the slightest from obediently listening to the sorta stuff *guys like you talk about?*”

Nevertheless, Tuturi managed to fearlessly smile.

She had enough of the lies she made serving under and humoring those who only had the capability for violence.

“Don’t justify your stupid cowardice. You were the ones who set the rules. Both Lucnoca and I are following those to fulfill our obligations. You’re the ones who broke the agreement.”

“...*Hah, hah-hah-hah.* And what of it, then? Are you going to kill me to get revenge, is that it? Not like the two of you can even do anything else, can you?”

Psianop moved.

He didn’t take a step in Tuturi’s direction, but with the slightest single motion, jumped an amazing distance backward.

An enormous thing smashed the frozen soil from underneath and blew away everything in the vicinity. Tuturi’s body flew through the air, together with the shattered bedrock, harshly smacking her back on the ground as she landed.

“Ow, ow, ow...ow!”

Tuturi screamed, as if spitting out her anger together with her pain.

Appearing as if to cut in between Tuturi and Psianop, was a worm.

Or at least, it appeared to be a worm.

“That was a close call, General Tuturi.”

It emitted a very gentle, and highly unwormlike voice.

“Close”?! Like hell it was, dammit! Why’d you get me caught in all that, Acromdo?!”

“If I didn’t, you would’ve been kill—”

A concussive sound resembling an explosion cut the worm’s words off.

Its flesh and organs dispersed in a spray. Its scales, harder than all except dragon scales, had been cut off.

Tuturi understood that Psianop had done it.

Psianop muttered, without relaxing the thin, sharp form of his

punch, “Knifehand strike.”

“...Acromdo!”

The worm’s tail still moved, and whipped Psianop.

His awfully tiny body, compared to the worm’s massive frame, was sent flying, but Psianop possessed the grotesque technique to stifle and brush aside all might. It definitely didn’t seem that the tail swipe dealt an effective blow.

Tuturi desperately got herself back up. She needed to flee.

The entirety of her body was soaked in a dreadfully chilly liquid, but she wasn’t sure if this was her own sweat, or blood.

“Pull back the army, Tuturi!”

There was a voice. Right behind her. Or perhaps from far away in the distance.

Wherever it was, her answer was the same.

“I don’t think...I will!”

Twice, thrice, the ground burst open and split apart.

The massive forms piercing the sky numbered five, then six. Their numbers increased even more.

A worm colony, unheard of in the natural world.

““““Nice to meet you, Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation.””””

All of them, circled around Psianop, spoke with their own voices in succession.

Someone who parasitized other living creatures could take the strongest bodies in the land for their own.

And in multiples, at the same time.

“My name is Acromdo the Variety. Let me help you out with your match.”

“Really, now. I can give you all a single bit of assistance of my own.”

The First Party ooze, weakest of all races, merely stood ready.

Oozes didn’t have any expressions of their own. However, if Psianop could have worn an expression at that moment...

“I’ll knock you all back into the bowels of the earth.”



Sindikar the Ark was directly above the domain of death.

Kiyazuna’s Craft Golem, driven by Sindikar, was realizing long-duration flight through its rotating wing function.

As a result of his aerodynamic improvements and weight reduction, he had also acquired a level of agility that even surpassed a wyvern's.

There was just shy of a thousand meters to Lucnoca below him. Still, death was right before his eyes.

The mere blast wave from Vikeon's attacks against Lucnoca launched dirt and sand-like bullets high up to where he was. Possessing even more muscular strength than that, if Lucnoca the Winter tried to shoot down the Craft Golem, there was no way he would survive unscathed.

Lucnoca still continued to treat Vikeon like a plaything.

It didn't seem like she would move from where she was, her starting place for the match.

"Does she not fear...my Lightning Flute?"

It was the only answer he could consider.

Lucnoca the Winter didn't flinch at all. She dodged the long-ranged fire from the Lightning Flute with the smallest movements possible, and she didn't show any signs of trying to escape nor any hint that she would try to kill Sindikar to stop it.

"Lucnoca the Winter. You have nothing to do with those who stood in the way of my dreams. Not one of those infuriating wyverns, nor the Kingdom brandishing their worthless authority at me. However."

Such a transcendental being, unrelated to anyone else in the land, was exactly who he wanted to force into acknowledging his existence.

By being the strongest individual across the land, it meant she was the strongest in the world of the sky, as well.

Feeling the blustering gusts, Sindikar twisted his crocodilian face.

"...I want to try beating you."

The cooler attached to the Lightning Flute—the huge and long machine gun, installed as if to pierce through the Craft Golem's middle, top to bottom—spit up vapors of intense heat.

In the cockpit, Sindikar immediately tore off the cooler and disposed of it through an opening. He could feel his skin burn even through his gloves, but it didn't bother him whatsoever. Right now, he was going to fire. As many times as it took.

He spoke to his own weapon.

"I flew. The sky's winds, the temperature, and the view are

together with me. Even an insignificant old geezer can fly through the air.”

He pressed the lever down. Connected the cooler. Loaded the deep celestial charsteel bullet into the powder chamber.

“‘Lightning Flute.’ What do you think?”

Adjusted the firing angle. Corrected the optics. Even during the extremely delicate work, he simultaneously operated the Craft Golem with perfect command over the air current, gravity, and flow of inertia, and he maintained a near-stopped flight position.

They were aberrant flying skills.

Those who excelled at Force Arts would, as a type of *game*, fly in the air.

Most among them would go no farther than a jump of a few paces, while a handful of preeminent masters could jump up two stories of a building all at once. Still a far cry from a wyvern’s free, uninhibited flight.

Zmeu with reptilian features were thought to share a closer relation to dragonfolk than the minian races.

Sindikar’s opinion differed. Zmeu and the dragonfolk were completely different.

Zmeu didn’t have wings.

When he first learned that there existed flight techniques done via Force Arts, young Sindikar was, first and foremost, puzzled.

If such techniques existed, then why didn’t all of the adults learn it for themselves?

He was sure that anyone who saw insects or birds must have longed to fly in the sky like them. Was every other adult besides him either abnormal or lazy?

Sindikar, as if in obvious pursuit, devoted himself wholly to Force Arts, forgetting to sleep and eat.

He was also warned that zmeu had less than half the Force Arts aptitude that the other minian races did. However, ever since the day he heard this, he then spent twice as much time on the pursuit.

There were some who would look at his obsession and laugh, sometimes others who would get angry with him, but when it came to the mind of these people, Sindikar accepted that a single answer applied to all of them, without exception.

They were all frustrated that they couldn’t fly high.

Even when, before long, he learned that it was impossible to fly

through the air with his own body, Sindikar's attempts at flight didn't end. He would shoot down wyverns from the sky, dissect them, and try to ascertain the differences in their Word Arts-based construction.

Going through various man-made wings via trial and error, he tried to maintain longer flights using the wind. An exhausting and draining number of flight tests. Flight. Gliding. Crashing.

The self-proclaimed demon king Sindikar hovered between life and death the most during his adolescence, before he opposed the Kingdoms.

In the Kingdom, there had been comrades of his who tried to foray into the skies like himself. That was when he learned that the study he had researched was known as the field of "aerodynamics."

Numerous flying machines were prototyped, and several among them actually flew in the air. Each time they did, an ardent delight would scorch Sindikar's chest—a sensation that, no matter how many years passed, he showed no signs of forgetting.

For them, they needed not just the knowledge to launch into the air but the power to fight midair as well. The masters of the sky were still the wyverns, and against their brutal fighting strength, light and fragile minian flying machines were far too powerless.

Many of his comrades with their sights on the sky were shot down. At the end of their trial and error, they had developed the piloting skills to avoid the flocking threat with their flying machine's maneuverability. But by that time, the number of pilots had heavily dwindled.

In the midst of it all, the True Demon King appeared.

Aviation development was discontinued. The state of the world grew tenser and tenser by the day, and the people in Sindikar's school would move on to different occupations one by one or volunteer for the military. The once-precious research results were gradually scattered and lost.

It was as if all of them were saying they didn't have the time to entertain such *games*.

Sindikar didn't give up.

No matter what the situation he was in, he demanded to forge ahead into the skies, and demanded budget for said research and the fuselages to do so.

However, by that time, Sindikar was the only one directing his zeal to the skies. The only thing sought from his aviation

development had always been an explanation of what exactly it would be good for, and nothing more.

If plans for weapons of destruction, capable of attacking an enemy stronghold from the air, were what was sought after, he didn't hesitate to do just that. Even if, after that, his research still didn't receive authorization.

An age where everyone trembled from an invisible terror, and none looked up at the skies above their heads.

In due time, Sindikar had turned into a self-proclaimed demon king.

He didn't remember ever turning off his path. Ever since he was a child, he had simply wanted to fly in the sky.

There were times when he would be asked, why did he go so far in his attempt to fly?

Nonsense. Absurd. An asinine question.

It was the sky.

Flying through *the* sky. *Why did he need a reason to do that?*

“...Continue fire.”

The frozen soil of the Mali Wastes.

From the very edge of the sky above, Sindikar tried to fix his aim through the sights at Lucnoca the Winter's neck.

Even with his control, combining his astounding piloting techniques and his Force Arts, the sights shook nonstop, were affected by the slightest breeze, and were even influenced by the rotation of the planet. Normally, it would be impossible to get a hit on the single point where her dragon scales were scraped away. Sindikar the Ark was a superb airman, but he wasn't a sniper.

Conversely, if Lucnoca the Winter, even at that very moment, were to suddenly turn up and blast her breath into the sky, no matter which direction she aimed, Sindikar would doubtlessly perish.

Nevertheless, Sindikar had always done whatever was necessary, if it allowed him to continue flying through the sky.

If he was ordered to kill the strongest living creature in the world, he would do just that.

Lucnoca makes light of the skies... In which case, I'll win.

While Tuturi's operation was enticing her to do so, at the very least, right now, Lucnoca the Winter wasn't attempting to fly. She was scorning altitude superiority.

It was impossible to escape shots from the sky.

The Lightning Flute was an artificial magic tool developed based on this thought in order to prove the effectiveness of an air force.

While it had been nothing but a shunned child, created against his will in order to continue his own research, this weapon had stayed with him longer than any of the flying machines he had made.

He had a bizarre fondness for it. He even wondered if a will of its own dwelled inside. This weapon, with innumerable improvements and repairs layered on top of it, was nearly like an extension of Sindikar's arms and legs.

"Sindikar io kara. Ars faludo. Daemanuvas tao, Ein harders..."
(From Sindikar to Kara hammer. Bone ravine. Horizon cavity. Sunlight tree...)

He utilized Word Arts on the Lightning Flute.

Coolant charged. First to fifth powder chambers readied to combust. Additional voltage was added inside the gun barrel.

Maintained fixed air position. Accelerate. Accelerate. Accelerate.

"Desk tel hafm. Nokas mit. Desure kanp—" (Dark jaws of abyss. Sound of adamantine crystal. Rupturing hot embers of stars and sky —)

As he used extremely complex Force Arts, a single misstep could bring about a lethal explosion. Sindikar's present powers of concentration weren't solely focused on Lightning Flute moments before it fired.

They were on the *orders* from the radzio.

< *Fire.* >

He pulled the trigger.

"Shakbistes." (Roar.)

The airspace split open. Red light burned absolutely everything.

An intense tremor made Sindikar wonder if it would cause cracks in his old bones.

Frothy blood spilled from the edges of his clenched teeth. He endured the impact that threatened to knock him unconscious mostly by forcing his zmeu physique to hold out. He had no other means to stay awake.

The ear-splitting roar must have continued to resound, but Sindikar didn't perceive it at all.

Despite exerting the mechanical recoil reduction technology and the Word Arts-based asymmetrical acceleration to their limits, the recoil from the Lightning Flute was still enough to put the wielder one step in the grave.

—!

Before anything else, he needed to make the Craft Golem, now out of his control, recover its balance.

Adjust the wing rotation. Return to high altitude. Reduce resistance.

Sindikar was able to carry it all out even when mostly unconscious.

He was the only one who had built up enough experience to do so.

“Did it hit?”

< *The aim was on the mark,* > a hoarse voice replied on the other end of the radzio.

Sindikar wasn't a sniper. During the series of attacks, what he did wasn't aiming, but controlling the flight positioning and the bombing machinery.

The supernaturally accurate air fire relied entirely on the orders from this spotter.

Was it possible that the spotter was even farther away than the sniper?

< *It only grazed her skin... The only explanation I can come up with is that Lucnoca the Winter is dodging after you fire.* >

“...I see.”

Lucnoca the Winter was alive.

Sindikar was able to confirm the massive white frame, reflecting the sun, through the smoke from the impact.

With no sign that her dodge from the Lightning Flute's attack shook her off balance, she handled Vikeon's ferocious attacks as if she was indulging a child.

“Predict where this dragon's going to dodge, and then tell me where to fire. I can hit her that way...”

< *That's exactly what I'm doing right now... As long as you're using a long-range weapon, the circumstances decided in the brief moment between launch and impact are something even my eyes can't interfere with...* >

Perhaps she was unlike anything even the man behind the voice had ever seen before.

To overturn the future solely with one's physical strength, despite a fixed prediction...

<Next time I'll predict her future thoughts, too. >

"Hmph. You can see that far?"

<I can. >

It was conceivable to have a spotter sitting farther away than the sniper.

This spotter was far away from both the battlefield and the main operational headquarters, deployed almost as far away as the line of the horizon.

This leprechaun, with the bandages wrapped around his face, hands, and legs in disarray, didn't possess any decisively lethal abilities...however, he was the greatest trump card that Iriolde's camp possessed, together with the four self-proclaimed demon kings.

That's how powerful my Clairvoyance is.

His name was Kuuro the Cautious.



Amid the frozen wasteland, the soil in Lucnoca's vicinity was boiling.

The ground surface, repeatedly fired on by the Lightning Flute, was red-hot and losing its shape like magma. It crumpled and sank just with Lucnoca standing on it.

The extreme temperature difference distorted the scene; however, Lucnoca the Winter's tranquil appearance amid it all looked like a white origin point where there were no air temperature changes at all.

"I would like to commend you for *lasting* until the sun went down, but..."

She used her back leg to smack down the black dragon's claws as he launched up from the earth.

Vikeon the revenant stubbornly continued to attack Lucnoca, even diving into the flowing ground to do so.

While he couldn't use his breath and had lost his ability to think, he was still a legendary ancient dragon.

He should have been a monster beyond the realm of minian comprehension.

Indeed, when Vikeon slammed with his claws, even after Lucnoca guarded against them, they caused cracks in the rock walls behind her from the impact, and each blow from his fangs was accompanied by the deafening roar of the sound barrier breaking, like thunder.

His dragon scales blocked out all current weaponry. Even if he suffered some internal damage, Yukis's mycelia would regenerate the tissue. Even when attacked by lethal biological weapons, he could continue to fight.

Vikeon, capable of bringing ruin to a nation's entire army with his physical strength alone, hadn't been mistaken.

Lucnoca the Winter was simply nothing more than an utter monster.

"...About time, wouldn't you say?"

Lucnoca narrowed her eyes.

Vikeon the revenant had some sort of trump card. She wanted to see it.

Perhaps...it was the poison that was making Lucnoca's body *ever so slightly* numb.

"I certainly hope that's not it... *Uhoo-hoo-hoo-hoo.*"

Poison. She found the endeavor cute. Charming, even.

In her many long years, too many to still remember, sword-wielding champions, bow-wielding champions, fist-fighting champions, Word Arts caster champions, had used all the means they could think up in order to kill Lucnoca the Winter.

Why, then, had they thought no one had ever tried to use poison or disease before now?

Among her countless experiences of battle, Lucnoca had acquired a bit of resistance against such attacks. Even methods that would have killed her a few hundred years prior no longer had any effect on her.

Was it a special attribute of dragons themselves? She couldn't even be sure of that. There wasn't any other dragon who had lived as long as Lucnoca the Winter, fighting constantly, emerging victorious, and growing stronger time after time.

For dragons, their very origins not known for certain, it was almost like an evolution had occurred within a single generation.

"Come now, hurry. The sun's almost down."

She casually knocked away Vikeon's tail, which was sent toward her through a blind spot.

The revenant screamed.

“Grrraaaaaaugh, grlg grlg grlg grangh!”

“Oh!”

She had only intended to drive him away, but she had accidentally cut it in two.

In the moment this caught her attention, the red lightning from the Lightning Flute rained down from above, but Lucnoca used her sharp wings to block the swordlike attack. Slashing away the acute cut threw off the attack’s trajectory, but she could feel the heat and impact through her dragon scales and down to the bones in her wings.

“My, my...”

There was a chance she wouldn’t immediately be able to fly.

However, what made Lucnoca even more worried was that the shockwave occupying her wing parry would *accidentally shoot down* the unknown thing flying far up in the sky.

Though it had been the fire aimed at her from this *thing* that had made Vikeon’s revenant a properly entertaining opponent.

Perhaps this poison is much stronger than the ones I dealt with in the past, too...

She had used too much power by mistake and accidentally destroyed two of her enemies.

At the very least, as far as Lucnoca could perceive for herself, the poison seemed to be successfully throwing her out of form.

Though, on the battlefield, it was proper for a warrior to have a small degree of injuries and restraints. The *small degree* was simply much vaster for Lucnoca.

In fact, it was now—with poison invading her body, her wings shot by the Lightning Flute, and scars from her fight with Alus the Star Runner—that Lucnoca the Winter could claim she was in perfect form, on par with other warriors.

“This worked out perfect, though. This way, no one will interrupt us, now will they?”

Now that she was perfectly prepared, she was ready to engage Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation.

“How exciting. Oh, I just can’t wait...”

The strongest of all dragons crushed the black dragon, still writhing at her feet, like a rat.

Amid the hell all around her, she smiled like an innocent young girl.



Like dragons, wurms didn't group up with other wurms.

Their enormous bodies, far surpassing those of wyverns, required an enormous amount of food. Thus, it was impossible for two or more wurms to share the same territory.

However, in this very narrow area of the Mali Wastes, there were seven wurms altogether.

All of them were targeting Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation.

"Why do you reject our power?" a worm asked curiously. "If you cooperated with us of your own will, then I wouldn't have to take control of you."

This colony of creatures who were exhibiting what was, for wurms, extremely weird behavior, were not, in fact, wurms at all.

They were monsters being manipulated by a living weapon belonging to the National Defense Research Institute, Acromdo the Variety.

The uprising of Old Kingdoms' loyalists in Toghie City that occurred suddenly with the attack of the Particle Storm—Iriolde the Atypical Tome's influence lay behind their seizure of the government assembly there. The National Defense Research Institute understood the *natural resources* that Toghie City had and how to effectively utilize them.

Of course, it was far from what would normally be called a natural resource when looking at it with common sense. In the realm of common sense, there didn't exist any being with enough power to bring down the wurms that inhabited the marshlands surrounding Toghie City and revive them as weapons.

"The flesh of dragonfolk is actually a lot softer than you'd imagine. Once I get a grip somewhere inside their body, it isn't too difficult to spread roots through them. For an ooze like you...it might be even easier."

"You... So, you're that Acromdo Qwell mentioned. That plant monster."

"I'm a dryad—a new species that still hasn't been discovered in your world."

Dryad.

Acromdo the Variety was a creature who had only recently been born in this world.

Grown from a seed brought over from the Beyond and then cultivated in the National Defense Research Institute until he grew a sense of self, Acromdo acted under an extremely simple behavioral principle—doing what his friends asked of him.

The concept of organisms of the same race having different bodies didn't exist for dryads, as all of their individual specimens multiplied by separating from the same mother root and shared their thoughts. In order to build a bond with someone, the only option was to *become friends* with other races.

Fortunately, Acromdo possessed the power to do so. If it became necessary to kill or disable someone, the minian races at the National Defense Research Institute would entrust those jobs to Acromdo.

Even if one part of his body was destroyed, he wouldn't die. Conversely, if he was able to bury a small fragment of himself in an enemy, he could control said enemy. He understood as a given that his race was absolutely invincible. He even wondered if maybe there existed no logic or reasoning in this world that could destroy him.

Whether it was an ooze with extremely honed hand-to-hand fighting skills.

Whether it was a legendary, champion-slaying dragon.

To Acromdo, it was all the same as his usual work.

He worked for the sake of his friends, and through it, we would be recognized by this world.

“Must be your first time fighting someone like me, right?”

On the Mali Wastes' frozen soil, Acromdo's colony began to constrict the circle around Psianop.

Without giving any opening for him to break through, they closed into a distance that would make evasion impossible.

“I can't wait to see how exactly you fight, Psianop...”

Normally, Acromdo would have had an attack range advantage that could crush the ooze without needing to be so careful. However, even he, taking pride in his invincibility, wasn't careless enough to underestimate an opponent like Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation.

“Hmph. A new race?”

Psianop laughed, as if looking down on Acromdo with contempt.

Acromdo tried to think about what sort of intention was behind this laugh of his.

A crunching *thud* rang out.

“One.”

Psianop’s figure, which was supposed to be in the middle of the encirclement, had disappeared.

That wasn’t it. He had sprung into the air.

Before Acromdo could completely surround him, Psianop had delivered a blow to one of the seven wurms.

Using all seven’s consciousnesses, Acromdo made them all focus on a spot in midair. Kicking off the skull of the worm he had just struck on the crown of the head, Psianop drew closer.

“Two,” Psianop murmured while he extracted a pseudopod from a worm’s eye socket.

Acromdo manipulated the third worm and smashed Psianop, worm and all.

It didn’t catch Psianop’s nimble escape in time. However, he had gained time to think.

I have to get a grasp...

The first worm had been knocked unconscious by the surprise blow. It could still move.

The second worm had lost its eyesight, but it was still healthy.

The third worm was just now coming under an attack.

On how to defend.

“Three.”

It was as if the worm’s head had been sliced off by a large invisible ax.

In some sense, it was a trick of the eye. Psianop’s hand chop, formed from his pseudopod, heavily struck the third worm’s neck. That was all—he hadn’t even cut through the worm’s scales.

What wasn’t a trick of the eyes was that this single attack, through the worm’s scales, simultaneously severed all its arteries and major nerves, essentially leaving it in a state as if its neck had been severed.

“You’re not getting—”

“Four.”

Right as the worm’s flesh burst open on its own and weblike roots expanded out radially, Psianop delivered a heavy blow to the fourth worm.

My senses—

Dryads were a new race composed of innumerable roots and branches that continued to expand by parasitizing other animals. If he could make the slightest bit of contact, he could parasitize that area and start digging deeper into the host.

Can't keep—

“Five.”

There were two still unharmed. The first two he attacked could also move.

Acromdo would make all of them self-destruct at the same time and rush Psianop from all angles. No matter how backed into a corner he may have been, Acromdo knew even the slightest bit of contact with his roots would earn victory.

However, the charge from the first worm was remarkably off balance, and it fell down, bringing another three with it.

The roots and branches that exploded late completely covered the stretch of ground and formed a colossally entangled, bizarre mass of flesh, before being smashed.

“...It can't be.”

On the initial attack that hit the first worm, Acromdo realized at that moment that a section of the worm's brain function had been destroyed.

“You said that if you work your way inside, you spread your roots, even through dragonfolk, yes?”

A tiny space, right in the middle of the roots spreading out like a lattice—it seemed like Psianop had suddenly appeared there.

No. This ooze had constantly moved through the blind spots of the enormous worm bodies Acromdo controlled.

Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation had turned this extreme difference in scale into an advantage.

“You're not telling me you really thought *this level of trickery* would actually have any effect on Lucnoca the Winter, are you?”

There was no factor to cause defeat.

There was no organism in the land that could survive being surrounded by seven worms working together. He proudly believed that they could even stop a dragon.

However, this puny ooze hadn't only survived uninjured, he didn't even appear to be out of stamina at all.

With movements that were as small as possible, and with speed faster than Acromdo could even think, he had induced Acromdo to self-destruct all the worms in his panic. In a flash of light, he

successfully wiped out all seven of the wurms.

“Impossible.” Acromdo groaned once more. “You couldn’t possibly...be that strong. Y-you’re just-just an ooze...”

Acromdo had never felt any hostility toward anyone.

He understood that even if he was defeated somewhere and repelled back, he would be the one to be victorious in the end.

However, Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation was the only one who was different.

He was so strong that it seemed like no matter how perfectly Acromdo laid out his preparations, no matter how much further he honed his innate strength, he still wouldn’t be able to defeat Psianop.

“I don’t... I don’t want to lose...”

“Then practice and train. I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“.....!”

There were some in this world who couldn’t become his friends.

Strong, mighty individuals who existed on an entirely different level, beyond what Acromdo could imagine.

Acromdo, still young and taking in all the different parts of minian society with curiosity and wonder, learned it for the first time.

The humiliation of defeat.



The ninth match was soon beginning.

Not under Lucnoca’s will, nor Psianop’s.

This battle had been orchestrated by Iriolde’s camp for the sole purpose of eliminating Lucnoca the Winter.

Despite all of this, there was still an accord at the start of the match. It would begin with the setting of the sun.

What do I need to do to make it in time?

Psianop considered the situation as he continued across the Mali Wastes, springing himself along.

Since the moment he had abandoned his carriage, it was a gamble whether or not he made it in time for the match to start.

On top of that, taking down Acromdo had required some amount of time as well.

So, I’m expending all my strength to head toward a fight I’m going

to lose?

It may have seemed like a fool's errand.

Nevertheless, he still wanted to battle against Lucnoca the Winter.

Was it for his vow? For his pride?

Still, I'm not fighting with the intent to lose.

Something fell from above his line of sight, up ahead to where Psianop was heading.

It was some machine, its shape unlike anything he had ever seen, but he had rotating wings—something that flew.

It wasn't a balloon.

“...A golem?”

His gut told him he could catch it.

More than half of the Mali Wastes was hostile territory with battle lines set up by Tuturi. While approaching an unidentified flying machine brought with it unknown danger, Psianop headed toward where it was falling.

Observing the target's construction and its descending trajectory, disturbed and irregular, he understood.

“Hwoo.”

It weighed as much as a cannonball.

Its speed may have very well been just as similar.

With a lithe movement, Psianop caught the slash from the spinning wings run amok, and despite twisting himself around to wrap them up, he let the tremendous impact spread through the ground through his pseudopod, briefly touching down on the ground.

The impact sounds, as if the surface was exploding, continued.

As though Psianop was the one being dragged along, the Craft Golem slowly scraped the ground and came to a halt.

The mist of fine ice particles scraped off from the ground suspended like a belt before scattering into the atmosphere.

The driving sounds of the golem stopped.

“...! You...”

The man crawling out from inside was a zmeu, resembling a black crocodile.

From a gap in his safety helmet poured a tremendous amount of blood, and it wasn't stopping.

His bones were likely broken in three places. Psianop could tell by the movements he made to crawl out of the golem.

“...You... Right. Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation...”

“Looks like you know who I am. One of Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam’s men, then?”

“That’s right. Sindikar the Ark...”

The evening sun was moments away from sinking below the Mali Wastes’ horizon.

The green afterglow was twinkling for a moment. Once it disappeared, the ninth match would begin.

“Koff, why save me...?”

“Because I was promised.” Psianop heartlessly addressed the old self-proclaimed demon king in the grips of death after challenging Lucnoca the Winter from the unforgiving skies and being shot down. “Tuturi said she would bring me to the arena. Use that machine of yours to take me there right now.”

“*Heh, heh...* I get it. So that’s why...you caught this thing without breaking it!”

Subtly manipulating his strength to hold not only destruction but non-destruction in his grasp—

When it came to accomplishing such a feat, Psianop’s techniques were on a level that none of the other hero candidates could hope to reach.

< *Stop.* >

A voice from the radzio cut in.

< *Fly again and you’ll die.* >

“No. I’ll...fly. I haven’t settled my score with Lucnoca. You just have to use those eyes of yours to predict the moment she attacks.”

< *You ended up like this* even with me predicting the moment of her attack. *The magnitude of it can’t be physically evaded in time. You damn well know that...*! >

The voice on the other end must have been the spotter.

Psianop found it awfully bizarre that the spotter wouldn’t be there with Sindikar, but...this had to be another supernatural being that the camp backing Tuturi had deployed, just like Acromdo.

< *Sindikar. You don’t have any duty to them to expose yourself to danger.* >

“Spotter.” Psianop quietly addressed him. “This man already knows about the danger you’re talking about.”

He had only just come across this Sindikar the Ark.

Psianop didn’t necessarily understand anything about his background, or his personality.

However.

“Given that, do you have any words that will stop him?”

<.....>

Psianop and this man were close.

People who were able to put everything on the line for something far grander than survival or logic.

Sindikar, wounded all over, pulled his body up. He wiped the thick blood off his forehead.

“...Kuuro the Cautious. We were only acquainted for a short while, but I’m still quite grateful for your help.”

He was looking up at the sky.

“But I want to give it a try.”

<...I see. Got it.>

The voice from the radzio ended with this before going silent.

Sindikar finished making adjustments to the Craft Golem with monstrous dexterity, clear even to Psianop’s eyes, and once again got inside the cockpit, dirtied with blood.

“You get in, too.”

“Is this machine really safe?”

“Don’t underestimate it. The crash just now was because my body couldn’t handle the sudden Force Arts acceleration.”

Sindikar broke into a ferocious smile as he looked hard at Lucnoca the Winter in the distance.

“I could’ve dodged that attack.”

Right as Psianop boarded, the Craft Golem’s engine let out a roar once more.

It almost seemed like the sound of Sindikar’s heartbeats.

The ooze flew through the sky, going to challenge the strongest of all dragons.

Had there ever been someone in this world who could have imagined such an impossibly epic undertaking?

The sun continued to set. The stars rose.

In order to fight. All merely in order to fight.

Fight me, Lucnoca the Winter.

Higher than even the extremes of the martial arts, he soared up into an unknown realm.

Ninth match. Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation versus Lucnoca the Winter.



Lucnoca the Winter looked to the horizon.

She hoped that she would see a carriage somewhere, but there were still no signs of Psianop.

...In the end, is that all this is?

The dullest images of all flittered through her mind.

The champions with the courage to challenge Lucnoca the Winter ended with Alus the Star Runner. The ooze, Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation, feared fighting her and had withdrawn from the tournament—or hadn't even existed to begin with.

The worst future of all was that the Sixways Exhibition that Harghent had spoken of with such enthusiasm was nothing more than an utterly futile plot to eliminate Lucnoca the Winter.

It wasn't the first time.

Much like how, from the perspective of her vast ocean of combat experience fostered during her long life, it wasn't her first time fighting against champions' techniques or lethal infections and poisons. Nor was it even the first time her hopes had been used, only to be betrayed.

Nevertheless, when it happened, Lucnoca would truly and genuinely hope.

She never destroyed the minian nations as retaliation for betraying her.

Her disappointments simply began to pile up, little by little, like falling snow.

No matter how long I wait, nothing ever changes...

At her feet, Vikeon's crushed and stamped-out carcass was pulled apart with a crunch.

Both in life and in death, Vikeon the Smoldering had been unable to best Lucnoca the Winter. She had already known.

Ester the Blooming White. Diagin the Scale Piercer. Shinae the Fleeting. Exeno the Infinite Skies. The strongest dragons she had ever known all battled Lucnoca long ago, and had all died.

Then, wasn't it meaningless to even expect anything from the other races?

Even if someone like Alus the Star Runner, a miraculous individual who overcame the boundaries of his own race. If innate and overpowering might still killed them, wasn't it all the same in the end?

Or perhaps, if had destroyed them all in retaliation once, something might have changed.

This wasn't the first time. Not the first betrayal, nor the first disappointment.

Like a pure white permafrost, Lucnoca's world remained completely unchanged.

Still, she always wanted to believe...

...that there was someone, somewhere, with the courage to challenge winter.

She wanted to believe it was still possible for the strongest to taste defeat.

Ahh... Once again, the sun falls.

The final thin line of the evening sun disappeared...



"Directly above her," Psianop told Sindikar, who was piloting the Craft Golem. "You're going to drop me down right above her right as the match starts."

"...That's it?"

"It's not even going to catch her off guard. But any uncalled-for meddling is useless."

No matter how honed his strength may be, no matter how skilled his technique, Psianop was still nothing more than a mere ooze.

His threat level to Lucnoca must have been close to nonexistent. Even then, he would be able to grab enough of her attention to allow Sindikar to escape after carrying him all this way.

"You just need to carry me to the arena."

"Hmph."

Sindikar laughed with his nose.

Sitting in the pilot seat, Sindikar was concentrating all his attention on the sky, barely even checking the instruments and meters installed in the Craft Golem at all. At this point, he might have had a complete grasp on the power at work in the machine as though it were an extension of his own body.

"The sky is the stuff of dreams. This held enormous military potential. To think then...it would be used to carry an ooze *just because it was a convenient ride...*"

“...That’s right; it is convenient.”

Psianop looked at the clouds flowing outside of the windshield, down below at the earth passing below him at high speed.

Perhaps he couldn’t understand the true meaning of this splendor that Sindikar spoke of.

“But everyone will think it’s convenient. That’s enough, isn’t it?”

“You might be right.”

Through the thin cloud cover, Psianop could see something glittering silvery-white and standing on the surface of the wastes. Lucnoca the Winter.

She was clearly there waiting for Psianop. Would he make it in time?

He would *make himself* get there in time, he thought.

“If we keep flying, it’ll be impossible to get perfectly over her head. I can’t drop you down easily.”

“No need. I’ll adjust.”

Psianop took off the windshield brace. Wind and gravity. Along with it, he felt his own inertia.

Taking it all into consideration, he would assault Lucnoca from far above.

It would require a nigh godly display of skill, like throwing a fine cotton thread into the distance and passing it through the eye of a needle.

< *You gotta pull back, Sindikar,* > the previously silent spotter shrilly declared. < *This is the end.* >

“Let me...teach you something, lad,” Sindikar answered with the exact same sullen look of displeasure he always wore. “There’s no one who can bring me down from the sky.”

At that moment, Psianop jumped out.

He couldn’t possibly get a full grasp of the air currents below him just through his midair observations. Both the wind strength and its direction dizzyingly changed as his altitude dropped. To match up with this, he transformed his body quickly and in great detail to keep on target.

He was aiming at a single point. If he missed the mark, his chance of victory would vanish.

Sindikar’s...

He turned his attention toward the Craft Golem that was getting father and father away with the speed of his descent.

Sindikar hadn't escaped.

Not only that—

"Sindiker io kara." (From Sindikar to Kara hammer.)

".....!"

The long cannon barrel that protruded from the bottom of the golem began taking on an ominous red hue.

Sindikar the Ark. He too was another self-proclaimed demon king.

Using Psianop's descent as bait, he was trying to get a direct hit with the Lightning Flute by his own aim.

"How...reckless!"

It was reckless. However, which one of them was actually the foolhardy one?

The ground, and Lucnoca the Winter, were closing in as fast as an arrow.

In the sky above him, the Lightning Flute. On the ground below, Lucnoca the Winter.

"Ars faludo. Daemanuvas tao—" (Bone ravine. Horizon cavity. Sunlight tree—)

Without waiting for him to reach the ground, the calamitous cannon fire was going to blast away Psianop and the whole airspace with it.

Yet at that moment, Psianop was looking at an ever-so-subtle movement down on the ground.

Lucnoca the Winter was...

With her claws...

Into the earth...

"Neutralizing Power!"

Preceding all the phenomena was a shock.

The destruction came without any warning, as if he was being thrown into the center of a volcanic eruption.

It was a tempest of sand and dirt, like buckshot, rushing up from the ground into the air.

Nothing but dirt and sand.

The surface gravel was flung up into the sky just from motion of Lucnoca far down below as she lifted one of her forelimbs.

It was impossibly precise.

Unimaginably powerful.

A hopeless amount of material.

A cracking, crumbling sound—a thunderous roar, as if airspace

itself was being condensed and groaning—followed.

“.....!”

Even in midair, without anywhere to escape, Psianop still managed to fend off the nightmarishly powerful turbulence just from the motion of his rotation and transformation, fully coping with the attack. It used the utmost limits of his concentration.

As he repeatedly turned over with dizzying speed, he could see far off into the sky at his back.

High up above Psianop, Sindikar’s machine turned into particles in the sky and scattered.

He thought about the spotter’s warning. That was the last chance for him to return alive.

Knowing that, even if it meant betraying Psianop, he had tried to battle against Lucnoca the Winter.

...*Sindikar the Ark.*

A shade of an emotion, like respect or empathy, crossed Psianop’s heart.

But there was no more time left.

He fell. He fell to the ground.

The sun sank and fell.

“Lucnoca the Winter!”

He simply hadn’t accepted the attack. Using everything, even the force from the destructive storm winds, Psianop now was perfectly plunging right at his target.

Psianop shouted, “The match starts now!”

If, assuming, Lucnoca the Winter had anything that could be called a weakness...it was her standards of cognition, stemming from her continued existence of absolute, unassailable might.

Far removed from all others due to her excessive power, Lucnoca could no longer see through the strengths and weaknesses of her adversary. The ones she had previously seen as weak had been so, and even those she believed were strong, without exception, had all been weak, too.

Had Lucnoca been cognizant of the diminutive ooze’s presence, descending simultaneously with the tremendous Lightning Flute attack? Did she know that right at the start of the match, her anticipated opponent had attacked her?

That was why he announced himself.

Right as Psianop declared the start of the match, he landed right at that point—

The precise spot he had been aiming for.

The left neck area of the ultimate dragon, where in the first round, Alus the Star Runner's Hillensingen the Luminous Blade, had cut away her dragon scale.

"Oh my." He heard Lucnoca mumble.

One attack.

The sun had set. The match had already started. Quickly.

Nimble, before Psianop's diminutive body could be blown away.

Everything with a precision to match this agility, as if reproducing his training.

Colliding at the base of Lucnoca's neck, Psianop's pseudopod was spread out wide.

He even turned the reaction to the impact of his fall into the starting point of his strike.

That was the purpose behind the widened contact area.

As such, it wasn't a sideways blow. Using all of his body weight, he struck diagonally upward.

It wasn't a punch. It was a palm strike, expanding his whole protoplast body into a width impossible for any minian body to replicate.

This didn't destroy his body's outer surface. He transmitted all the momentum used for destruction inside of himself.

Thus, it was an attack that *smear*ed his whole body in a single second.

One attack is enough!

It wasn't a technique of this world.

It wasn't a technique he learned out of books from the Beyond.

Nor was it even a technique someone else had taught him.

It was the technique that killed Neft the Nirvana.

A technique that Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation had created.

A move that was peerless, and only possible for a formless ooze grappler.

A brilliant unarmed martial art move that ignored the dragon scale defenses, and destroyed the brain stem, a spot in her vital internal core.

“Spit out your brains.”
A singular, knockout blow.
“Howling Fluid Heavy Power.”



“Hmm, did something...”

Lucnoca’s claws, unconsciously *patting* the back of her neck, felt a weird viscous sensation of something stuck to her.

That was the end of it.

“Touch me?”

Lucnoca looked curiously at the *filth* on her claws.

The curtain of night had long descended, and it seemed like Lucnoca had been left all alone in the winter wasteland.

Vikeon’s disgraceful remains were scattered at her feet, mixing in and churning with the rock.

Fragments of jet-black dragon scales were mostly buried and glittering in the melted earth.

She had been fiddling with them out of boredom until they ended up like this before she knew it.

“.....”

The soil, boiled by the heat of the Lightning Flute, had already frozen solid.

Having grown tired of fighting Vikeon, she had tried entertaining the flying machine that fearlessly came toward her, but perhaps as an effect of the poison, she may have mistakenly used too much of her strength.

No matter how long she waited, those red lightning bolts didn’t rain down on her anymore.

“...Well. I guess I had plenty of fun.”

Led by Harghent the Still to the Mali Wastes, she had the opportunity to fight against Alus the Star Runner, an enemy unlike any other she had seen. That memory alone was plenty.

Lucnoca the Winter might have been asking too much to hope for anything beyond that.

“All I have to do...is wait, after all.”

She would continue waiting for champions back in the cold and lonely Igania Ice Lake.

She wouldn’t get involved in minian nations anymore.

The thought ran through Lucnoca's head as she spread out her wings.

".....ight me."

".....?"

Something bizarre happened.

The piece of *grime* she had just tossed on the ground spoke to her.

"The match...has started. Lucnoca the Winter...!"

Of course. The match had begun.

Obviously Lucnoca must have known that as well.

She had heard a voice say so when she knocked the flying enemy out of the sky.

Why had she forgotten something that happened moments ago?

"Ahh. I've been waiting for you! You must...*koff, gahak, hrnk, blerg!*"

The almighty dragon's vocal cords let out a murky, awful sound.

A sticky, almost solid, viscous liquid drained endlessly out of her mouth.

The white ground and the black sky melted together and dissolved away.

Sounds were far away. Her sense of smell was clogged.

The forgetfulness had been a symptom.

Severely impaired functions from *her brain being destroyed*.

"*Blugh, gaherk, augh, glrg.*"

"That is a vomiting reflex that comes from losing your sense of equilibrium. I destroyed the myelobrachium that, together with your brain stem, communicates your sense of balance through your semicircular canals—the inferior cerebellar peduncle. Forget flying—you can't even tell up from down."

Wonderful. Fantastic.

A creature of this world had been able to do such a thing?

In that moment, she hadn't accidentally used too much force to blow away the flying machine because she was out of sorts from the poison.

Her instincts as a living creature had correctly sensed the direction of *the true threat*.

Not only that, but this ooze had informed Lucnoca that the match had started.

Right at the awaited time and right at the awaited place,

Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation had actually appeared.

Without launching a surprise attack, he had erased the intent to kill that Lucnoca would instinctually react to, and when she reflexively brushed him off her neck, he was finished sending a knockout blow with marvelous dexterity.

For an ooze, that one attack should have blasted his whole body to pieces, and yet he still lived.

Was it Life Arts? Long, long ago in the past, she had fought a minia who could completely regenerate his body.

“Glrgh, hoo-hoo, bwoo, hoo, grrlgh...”

Marvelous. Wonderful.

Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation was, in both courage and skill, a powerful fighter on par with Alus the Star Runner.

“It’s futile!”

She knew he was calling her.

Unconsciously, Lucnoca brandished her claws. The ground’s surface was completely gouged out and had begun to vanish.

She spread her wings, tottered, and propped herself up on her forelimbs. Her jaw bit down on the empty air.

Far removed from her usual elegance, Lucnoca the Winter writhed around like a beast that couldn’t comprehend Word Arts.

“Lucnoca the Winter. You’re...going to die!”

Her tail, half cut off, swung across the ground like a crazed worm.

Along its path, she kicked up dirt and gravel that seemed to sketch a black wall in the air.

Though each move carried enough overpowering physical strength to destroy everything, she couldn’t set her sights on her foe.

She could no longer control her high-speed flight capabilities that allowed her to outright reject melee combat.

On top of that, with her vomit blocking out her own lungs, she couldn’t incant the words for her breath attack.

How absolutely wonderful.

“Glbblgh, gahurk, blerk, blrgh... Hoo, hoo-hoo-hoo...!”

Now she could fight *to her heart’s content*.



The beautiful dragon, a being rivaling the gods, fell to the earth.

The blasphemy of her terrible final moments spread out in front of Psianop's eyes.

Howling Fluid Heavy Power got a full hit on her. It will be impossible for her to maintain her vital functions.

Lucnoca's enormous wings slammed down violently from above him with terrifying speed.

Though the speed and area of attack made evasion impossible, Psianop observed the indications of each move she made with care.

"You're still...moving...and floundering, are you...Lucnoca...?"

In the darkness of night, Psianop didn't overlook any of his enemy's movements. He continued to calculate out the end the fight was heading toward and the endless different divergences from there. Despite it all, there still remained an unassailable gap in power.

Would he be able to continue dodging a dragon opponent, everything about them on a hopelessly different scale from an ooze?

Even his first attack had been part of a do-or-die strategy, under the assumption that they would kill each other.

He meant to kill her with his fatal strike, Howling Fluid Heavy Power, in exchange for squandering one of his remaining three regenerations.

Lucnoca still wasn't dead. Psianop needed to continue fighting.

Using a slight dip in the terrain, he dodged the tail attack that accompanied her twisting body. As her dragon claws rampaged about, he discerned only the attack heading toward him and dodged with his whole body.

Lucnoca the Winter's faculties had already been killed. Her transcendent brute force wouldn't continue for long.

If Psianop could just buy a little more time, she would use up all her strength.

Just a little more.

He would win. And he would survive.

The two things he couldn't possibly hope for against an opponent like Lucnoca the Winter were just within reach.

After just a bit more.

Was 'just a little more' always this far away...?!

Immediately following his tireless evading, her dragon claws attacked him once again.

A storm more chaotic and fatal than any other in the world.

Despite it all, Psianop was watching closely for signs of her next move.

He read everything completely and responded.

Even if evasion was impossible, he had plenty of time to ready his guarding hand.

Neutralizing Power.

Just as he previously endured the dirt and sand, like raining artillery fire despite being in midair with nowhere to go—

It was a technique that deferred the impact by manipulating his center of gravity and direction of motion, blocking attacks regardless of the enemy's strength.

The claws were coming.

Psianop used all his might to turn aside the force. Contact. Reaction.

A loud splat rang out.

Half his body was torn off and sent flying.

“...! *Por pupeon. Perpipeor.* (Full large moon. Circulate.)”

He should have been able to completely take the attack.

There hadn't been any irregularity in Psianop's technique.

Her attack was nothing but the mere struggling of a beast on its deathbed, an attack of brute power, its direction and moment of impact plain as day. And in truth, that was all it had been.

The techniques he had spent a long time mastering and perfecting, in a single attack—

“...Impossible!”

He screamed. The single attack he should have guarded against had greatly chipped away at the ooze's life.

Lucnoca the Winter was fatally wounded. She might have exhausted herself from all her fighting beforehand.

Despite all of that, was she ultimately able to wrestle his technique into submission?

“I...!”

Impossible to defend.

Completely unrelated to whether she was fatally wounded or not, Lucnoca the Winter's attacks were more than powerful enough to kill Psianop without leaving a trace.

He still watched the signs in the hazy consciousness following his full-body regeneration.

Steadily gazing. Observing close. He had to dodge everything.

Understanding her completely isolated and unequalled strength,

an imminent terror rose inside him.

The movement of her brandishing her claws, drawing an arc. He could see the trajectory. The moment they would arrive, too.

With everything he had, he do—

“Ngh!”

He was cleaved once more. Only barely leaving behind his nucleus and nothing more.

A second time.

In the blink of an eye, Psianop died twice.

Impossible to evade.

“*Perpipeor...! (Circulate!) I-it can't be...*”

There was nothing left.

Psianop's life expectancy, after devoting twenty-one years to his training, at most would be another twenty-nine years.

He had used full body regeneration, each time consuming five years of his cellular life span, five times.

Once against Neft the Nirvana.

Once against Toroa the Awful.

Now, three times against Lucnoca the Winter.

Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation, in this match, had lost his entire future.

“*Glrgr, gahurk, blrgh, bwaugh...Hoo, hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-bhoo...!*”

When Psianop finally grasped the truth behind the hideous sound that continued to escape from the dragon's respiratory system, it terrified him.

Laughter.

Lucnoca the Winter was enjoying herself.



The secondary command post was situated on a plateau. Twenty-First General, Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam, observed Lucnoca the Winter from the plateau through binoculars.

“...What's happening?”

She couldn't understand any of it.

Vikeon, who was supposed to be fighting against Lucnoca up until that moment, had disappeared somewhere.



Scattered all over the ground was the carcass of *something* chopped up into small bits, but she definitely didn't want to believe something out there was capable of rendering a dragon into such a state.

The biological weapon they infected her with should have exhibited its effects a long time ago.

Despite it all, Lucnoca was still running amok, looking to be fighting against *something*.

"...What the hell? This is bad. This is...really bad..."

Her gloved fingers, gripping the binoculars, were engorged with blood.

Even if killing her was impossible, they had needed to at least drive her to the edge until fighting was difficult for her.

Tuturi had deployed all the trump cards she could imagine. The fact that Lucnoca wasn't even a bit exhausted meant that this battle, from the very beginning, was at an impasse, didn't it?

< *Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam. Sindikar the Ark is dead.* >

She heard the spotter's voice come through the radzio.

< *He was pulverized, machine and all, by soil and dirt kicked up into the sky. Air superiority was meaningless against Lucnoca.* >

"...Sindikar? That can't be."

< *You believe my report. Go ahead and ask your heart rate right now.* >

Tuturi had known that Lucnoca the Winter was all-powerful. Everyone in the world knew it.

Nevertheless, even seeing it for herself, how could she believe that the dragon was *this* mighty and powerful?

< *Vikeon lost a long time ago. He was chopped up, dragon scales and all. Meaning that for Lucnoca, he wasn't even worth taking seriously.* >

"Then..."

Lucnoca the Winter continued to fight. Even with the surrounding stretch of land illuminated with lights, Tuturi's vision through the binoculars wasn't able to see what exactly she was fighting in the darkness of night.

"What is Lucnoca doing right now?"

< *She's battling Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation.* >

Lucnoca's opponent for the ninth match had been a lure to

make absolutely sure Tuturi's operation succeeded.

Despite learning that this battle was all farcical setup, he still honestly headed out to meet her?

"*Hah, hah-hah-hah-hah-hah...* It can't be. Psianop...he defeated Acromdo? Seriously...? Why is he fighting? At this point...why...?"

Defeating all the obstacles in front of him, he jumped into the mouth of hell all for his assured defeat.

Why were he and the others able to carry out such a fool's errand?

There wasn't a single thing to be gained from it, yet they were risking their lives.

They could face it head-on.

With a dream, they were able to fight.

<I know now that even without using her breath, Lucnoca's area of attack has extremely wide range. That secondary command post isn't safe either. Even at my distance I'm in danger. Your decision to make. >

"...Right. I guess I can't drag my feet forever, can I...?"

Piecemeal deployment in war was inconceivable. Tuturi's trump cards had all been laid right from the very start.

A large force was spread across the Mali Wastes, but their minian squad had been little more than a reserve fighting force, readied under the assumption that Vikeon could contain Lucnoca.

She needed to withdraw them immediately. If she asked Haade for reinforcements, the entire Aureatia army could be sent into action. Even if a decisive land battle was accompanied with heavy casualties, there was a chance that Lucnoca would leave without pursuing Tuturi and her forces.

A commanding officer who still tried to hold out in a situation like this was incompetent.

"...Tell me, Kuuro the Cautious."

Therefore, her question was simply to confirm something that had already been decided.

If the man with Clairvoyance, able to predict the future, could simply tell her it was all in vain...

"Do you think Psianop can beat Lucnoca?"

<..... > Clairvoyance replied. *<I don't know. >*



Tuturi began walking toward the temporary command tent.

She couldn't help listening to the far-off sounds of Lucnoca's battle, noises like the ground crumbling away, and thinking they signaled the end of the world.

"Notify all troops: Continue the operation," she told the communications operators. "Vikeon the Smolder was defeated...but our series of attacks has definitely pushed Lucnoca up against a wall. In her current state, unable to fly or use her breath attack, Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation is keeping her at bay."

The one and only Kuuro the Cautious had said *he didn't know*.

While the possibility may have been nearly zero, there might have been a chance of victory.

For the terribly diminutive and terminally foolish Psianop.

She wasn't about to run away now.

"Right now, this is the only chance weak minian like us have to defeat that dragon."

There were still options left.

"Mechbow teams three through four, prepare to volley! Maintenance teams nine to eleven, match the timing of the volley. Twenty-first, deploy the Cannon Golems! Stuff them with all the tracers and biological rounds you've got! Make sure to finish loading all units!"

Not a single person was thinking that they could engage Lucnoca the Winter and return home alive.

The commanding officer Tuturi was no exception.

She could fight with her life on the line.

"Sixth Word Arts team! Work your Thermal Arts with everything you've got, and send every damn unmanned balloon flying! Lucnoca shot down Sindikar the Ark—there's a good chance she'll turn her attention to any flying object! The first manned balloon team will wait for my orders and operate surface lights!"

There were still options left.

Traps.

Poison.

Flashes of light.

Explosives.

Weapons.

It wasn't over. As long as they were still minian, they could continue their crude, disgraceful, and ugly fight.

Finished giving her orders to the entire force, Tuturi staggered

out of the temporary command tent.

She looked up at the same night sky where Sindikar had fallen.

It was a downright loathsome starry night sky.

“Hah, hah-hah.....hah-hah-hah-hah-hah.”

A self-deprecating laugh slipped out of the corner of her mouth.

With this, she was no longer able to run. Defeat meant death.

She felt great.

“Hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah! How’s that Psianop?! I ain’t letting you be the only one to put their life on the line!”

Tuturi shouted.

Harghent. Qwell. Sindikar. Psianop.

There were those who were able to stand up against an all-powerful being of hopelessness taken form.

“Dreams or no dreams! Strong or not! It doesn’t matter...! Hah-hah-hah-hah-hah! Anyone can fight for one’s life!”

She would rather die than have those types believe she had *lost and run*.

She was going to prove to them all that even people like her could do the same thing.



Meanwhile, there was a carriage drifting farther and farther away from the Mali Wastes.

The carriage was for prioritizing the evacuation of key figures to the camp. Eighth Minister Quewai the Moon Fragment was one of these key individuals.

“I wonder if Tuturi will retreat. It seems like she’s a bit slow in making her decision,” Quewai mumbled, looking down and addressing no one in particular.

There was no carriage following behind them.

“Hmm. She is a tad late, isn’t she?”

Even under the current circumstances, Viga the Clamor’s mild tone and demeanor remained unchanged.



"It can't be helped, if even Vikeon's revenant couldn't contain Lucnoca. It just means that from the very start, no weapon that we minians could wield will defeat her. Fleeing is a wiser choice, isn't it?"

"Though I did want to observe it all for a bit longer myself!"

The two of them, sitting across from each other, heard a voice from below. Yukis the Ground Colony.

Appearing to be some sort of quirk of his, the man wasn't sitting, but lying out on the floor.

"She's already acquired resistance to the completely brand-new fungus species Nectegio created...! Or at least, resistance to the toxins the fungus generates! For a living creature, that is quite amazing! Wonderful! Beautiful! If only I could analyze her more closely, I could advance my research so much more! *Eeeagh*, how tantalizing!"

"You two are assets never meant to be out on the front lines in the first place. We simply needed you to be present to prepare for any unforeseen circumstances around utilizing these brand-new weapons," said Quewai.

Vikeon the Smoldering's revenant was a compound Word Arts weapon that Viga had created, the first of its kind, with Yukis incorporating an automatic repairing mechanism via mycelium. If Vikeon had malfunctioned or gone out of control, there wasn't anyone else but the two involved with his creation who could handle the situation.

Thus, now that Vikeon had been defeated, Quewai's role was to evacuate Viga and Yukis swiftly. These two and their capability to create constructs held an extremely large strategic value to Iriolde's camp—likely more so than the Twenty-Nine Officials, Tuturi, and Quewai.

"Well, we need you two to put in work toward our future plans."

"Hmm, it's a lot easier for me to go against a minian opponent, too, but... Are we even going to get the chance anyway?" Viga said, her smile never wavering. "If Lucnoca the Winter *felt like it*, she could erase Aureatia off the map before it can be overthrown."

"I'm totally fine with that! Whether Aureatia's overthrown or goes to ruin, it means the extinction of the Kingdoms! I'll be able to

freely conduct my research without worrying about any oppression! What do you say to that, Quewai?"

"I'm all set, thank you."

"Ice cold! I really think you're suited for research, Quewai!"

If Tuturi had some reason to still hold out where she stood, then perhaps it was to stop such a chaotic world from coming, but Quewai had a feeling that wasn't why. At the very least, Tuturi wasn't someone who fought for order or justice.

If Tuturi does have some reason, it'd have to be...

Quewai had no way of knowing, but on the day of self-proclaimed demon king Alus's attack, it was the same reason that Psianop had given Toroa, on this very road, about why he was taking on Lucnoca the Winter in a fight.

Pride.



Explosions slammed the surface of Lucnoca's white dragon scales one after another.

The soldiers surrounding the basin lined up a total of eleven Cannon Golems and maintained an incessant artillery barrage.

Just like the Craft Golem Sindikar piloted, they were golems produced by Kiyazuna the Axle and requisitioned from Kaete's camp. Thus, they possessed the absolute best performance of the age, but even a battery of Cannon Golems served as little more than sacrificial pawns—substitutes for Vikeon.

Yukis's newest biological weapon was loaded into the warheads. Lucnoca should have already been infected mid-battle by Vikeon, but it was a method of guaranteed infection on the off chance that she hadn't been.

More than anything, the cannon attack—both a feint that didn't require precision aiming and an attempt to infect her—was a tactic that suited the heartless golems who merely moved according to how they had been previously configured.

"Don't let them hit the ground!" Tuturi gave orders to the maintenance team on the other end of the radzio. "You'll hinder Psianop's movement! It's fine to miss; just aim near her head and keep disrupting her!"

The maintenance team was charged with tuning the Cannon

Golems—in other words, they were going about their work almost right in front of Lucnoca the Winter.

While the golems were easy to operate for a self-proclaimed demon king, regular soldiers needed personnel on-site to operate them—one for every two golems.

Tuturi heard a voice through the radzio before she could finish giving her orders.

< *Commencing blood agent dispersal!* >

Toxin sprayed from the manned air balloons.

The cyanogen chloride gas prevented an organism's cellular respiration, disabling the threat of her breath.

This was different from Yukis's biological weapon and, of course, harmful to the minian soldiers deployed on-site. While they were all wearing gas-blocking helmets, the slightest mistake would mean an agonizing and painful death. On top of that, it likely had even less of an effect than the biological weapons, too.

Even then, they added it to the attack. Tuturi had decided to take every measure she could.

"Please work...!"

Lucnoca's enormous body shivered, and the raging storm of her dragon's claws seemed to halt for just a moment.

Though, given how far away she was observing it all from, it might have been nothing but a hopeful trick of the eyes.

Perhaps it had been brought about by the move Psianop unleashed, the Howling Liquid Heavy Power, destroying the dragon's motor center.

"Please...!"

Tuturi was mostly praying.

Kuuro's observations said that Lucnoca should have already been fatally wounded.

In which case, even if it was through sheer force, if they continued to disrupt her movements while she dangled on her last leg and kept her focused on Psianop, they would be able to finish it all without a single casualty.

"Word Arts team! Forget about the unmanned balloons! Lucnoca hasn't given them any attention...! Move to point six-five-eight, twenty-one. Support the mechbow team's aim! I'll give the order to light the lamp!"

< *Yes ma'am! Moving out!* >

The radzio informed her of another squad's movements.

< General Tuturi. We've finished getting the mecbows ready! We have visual confirmation of the target right now... >

"Wait a bit... See for the direction... You gotta get to a position that'll ensure the shots all hit their mark, or it'll be a waste! Not yet!"

She was praying.

If now, at that moment, Lucnoca opened her mouth and blew her Ice Arts breath, everything would be over.

Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam didn't gamble on possibility.

She couldn't let any coincidences happen.

Lucnoca the Winter inevitably needed to die right here.

"Die, Lucnoca... I'm begging you..."

Lines of light flew like a fine rain, and Lucnoca's surface flashed.

Flames from the Word Arts team's Thermal Arts. Obviously, the attack wasn't trying to be lethal.

The manned balloons offered support by spraying propellant. In the darkness of night, Lucnoca's body was wreathed in flame.

It made it easier to get sight of a target.

"Please, please, just die...!"

The odds-on favorite for Tuturi was the volley attack from the mecbows.

The perfect opportunity would come. Just a little bit more, if she turned her body toward the Word Arts team...

"Not yet, not yet, not yet...!"

Lucnoca turned around in the direction of the Word Arts team.

Her stance...

Her center of gravity's dropped!

Tuturi screamed into the radzio.

"Word Arts team, retreat! An attack's coming your way!"

< We can see! But, at this distance— >

Lucnoca the Winter swiped the earth, as she flopped down.

The explosion echoed all the way to where Tuturi was.

A torrent of earth and rock, enough to transform the terrain, crushed the entire Word Arts team.

"...Hah, hah-hah."

She had known. It wasn't a problem of whether she *used her breath or not*.

Even Sindikar, far above up in the sky, had been shot down in the collateral damage of her fight.

The avalanche of stone and dirt hadn't been an intentional attack, but simply a reaction to a stimulus.

She had taken in enough poison to ruin a nation, had been hit with a lethal attack that destroyed her brain stem, and had still managed to do this.

There was no safety zone.

"What the hell...?"

"G-General Tuturi! We really should retire—"

"Manned balloon team! Work the terrain lights with Craft Arts! Go ahead and make it pitch-black! Mechbow team, continue to stand by and follow the spotters' judgment when firing! Don't let out any light or sounds, whatever you do! There's a chance that Lucnoca...that Lucnoca the Winter is sensing the direction of the Heat Art temperature changes and reacting to it!"

The lamps affixed to the ground began to go out one by one.

The balloon team's Craft Arts closed off the lamps and blocked out the air.

She had set the start time to evening in part so that they could plunge Lucnoca into darkness after her eyes got accustomed to the light.

At this point...how much of an effect are these cheap tricks even going to have?! We're up against Lucnoca the Winter here!

Lucnoca's movements suggested she was slowly regaining her balance.

From far away, Tuturi heard the dragon's growl, like the destructive roar of the sea.

As if she was laughing.

"Piss off..."

Tuturi gritted her teeth.

She was going to kill the strongest of all dragons.

Now that she had decided to do it, she would, no matter what.

"Like hell...I'm letting this much get me scared...! Lucnoca the Winter!"



The scene reflected in Lucnoca's eyes was like a hazy shadow.

In the Mali Wastes, the same as that frozen land in Iganias, the past she retraced—her numerous battles against champions—

overlapped with each other, flicking through her mind.

Amongst them were ones who boasted speed rivaling her dragon claws.

There were ones with an immortal body who could regenerate over and over again.

There were ones who used weapons that blew poison and fire.

It was as if Lucnoca was fighting all of them at once.

However, it was different from them all. Lucnoca knew that.

Psianop.

Right now, Lucnoca's sense of sight wasn't functioning.

However, she could see his presence. She tried to touch it.

In her fogged consciousness, she couldn't temper herself like usual, but even when it seemed her claws had grasped a silhouette, it would slip through her hands as if it was the vestiges of a dream.

...So your name is Psianop, is it?

Her attack didn't hit.

Was it an illusion due to her optic nerve abnormalities, or had the finesse in her movements been destroyed?

Lucnoca wanted to believe that wasn't the case.

He's surviving my claws.

Even if it was a fickle miracle that would vanish under the slightest misfortune—

That miracle was because of this tiny ooze's everlasting and devoted study.

“Gahak, koff, glrg, glrboo, bwoo-bwoo-bwoo.”

Writhing, ripping, tearing, she coughed out blood.

Even then, she continued to fight within her hazy perception.

With her terrifying combat experience etched into her across many, many years, she was making it possible.

Creatures with the respiratory center of their brain stem suspended cannot take in fresh oxygen.

If they have an abnormality in their cardiac center, their pulse will become irregular, and their blood flow will stagnate.

Blocking off signals to the brain would result in lost consciousness...a comatose state.

Ahh. How wonderful.

In that case...should something with a dying body that was in a mostly comatose state between dream and reality, yet still continued to keep fighting, truly be called a living creature at all?

With the wound to her brain stem, she was beginning to lose function at the tip of her hands. Nevertheless, she could brandish her claws using only the still functioning muscles of her shoulders and back. Even now, everything about her possessed more than enough violent force to lay waste to an entire army.

Even in the long history of the Beyond, there hadn't been a single person who could stop its arrival.

It wasn't a living creature.

It was a phenomenon, a law of nature, and despair.

"...Koff, hoo...hoo! Hoo-hoo-hoo...hoo-hoo-hoo! Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo! Hrk, urgg, uhoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!"

The Beyond, where visitors came from, was said to be a world where the climate changes not according to the region, but according to the passage of time.

With the year split into four, there was one time of the year among them that had been named as such.

A time comes when everything returns to silence, sealed away in beautiful ice, where plants, animals, everything in the world dies once, before waiting for the next time of rebirth.

It is known as "winter."



He was desperate.

In a literal do-or-die struggle, Psianop continued to dodge Lucnoca's attacks.

Claws and tail. Sometimes her enormous body itself swept away the battlefield as she writhed in agony.

From which direction would she come, how would she attack—at this stage, it was no longer possible for him to grasp.

Each action Lucnoca took in the supposed jaws of death consisted of attacks that pierced through Psianop's full-powered defenses, overtaking his wholehearted evasion. Thus, escape was his only option.

Jumping, crawling, shapeshifting. The extremes of his technique. Vast experience. The capabilities of his undefined form. Using all of it to the absolute fullest, Psianop the Inexhaustive Stagnation simply ran around, trying to escape.

Moving his body with desperation, regardless of how he looked, as if to maintain a tight grip on miraculous good fortune.

Each individual second seemed to condense the entire life that the fragile ooze had lived up until that moment.

I've never...been able to overcome anything.

His thoughts strung together incoherent words, as though they were his last dying gasps.

I've always just...been lucky to escape from threats to my life.

There was an impact. He needed to withstand the explosion that threatened to scatter his body in every direction.

Lucnoca the Winter's attack hadn't directly hit him, nor was he feeling the artillery attacks from the golems under Tuturi's command—it was just an *aftereffect*.

Believed to have exhausted her life already, Lucnoca the Winter intensified her power further, gouging the earth with her dragon claws, tormenting Psianop with the aftershock despite his evasion.

The golem's cannon shells and the lines of fire from Thermal Arts flickered in the night sky.

All of it was raining just as heavily down on Psianop at Lucnoca's feet, but compared to the terror of Lucnoca the Winter in front of him, it almost made him feel relieved.

I need to withdraw.

Since he had confidently dealt her a lethal blow, it was pure foolishness to stay within her range.

Psianop understood that for himself. He was, in reality, doing just that.

And yet, still, Psianop *was compelled* to dodge Lucnoca's attacks. Why?

Why can she move? Why can she fight? Why...?

Lucnoca the Winter had a large section of her brain stem destroyed, had lost her sense of equilibrium, and despite it all—

"Hoo... uhoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!"

Why can she pursue me?

Lucnoca the Winter was clearly trying to grab hold of Psianop.

Supreme physical abilities and a ruinous Ice Arts breath.

Who had said *that was all there was* to Lucnoca the Winter?

Soujirou the Willow-Sword. Rique the Misfortune. Kuze the Passing Disaster. As well as Kuuro the Cautious—much like how fighters with rare gifts would sometimes perceive the world with different senses from the average person.

Lucnoca the Winter *possessed even that*, too.

With what went beyond just a sixth sense, she was able to continue fighting as her sight, her hearing, and her sense of equilibrium were all destroyed.

A progeny of combat. Every single thing about her was on a completely different level.

My...

At this point, he was forced to acknowledge it.

...My judgment came up short. Supreme physical abilities and a breath that annihilated heaven and earth. Unbreakably tough dragon scale. Flight. Reflex speed. Combat experience. I carelessly believed... that she didn't have anything beyond that.

Several hundred years. Or perhaps a thousand.

Over that long stretch of time, how many champions had exhausted however many different means to try to bring down Lucnoca the Winter, the embodiment of strength without peer.

He was convinced that all the means intelligent beings could possibly conceive had been completely spent to defeat this single dragon.

There wasn't anyone who could stop the arrival of winter.

I'm going to die.

He had died three times in this fight.

Lucnoca, due to several factors, had her strength diminished. On the other hand, Psianop had fought with his full strength.

Nevertheless, he was surviving by good fortune. Nothing more than pure luck.

In this situation, where Lucnoca was sunk into darkness and unable to clearly see the ground, and Psianop could counter her with precision, it was still by good fortune that he was able to evade her attacks.

"Uhoo, hoo, hoo, hoo! Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!"

...Even if that's so—

He was running around trying to escape.

After connecting with the attack Psianop had gambled everything on, there wasn't anything else he could do.

Remember. Remember, remember, remember!

He must have had memories far stronger than this terror and panic.

Romzo. Alena. Lumelly. Fralik. Yugo. Izick. And Neft.

Psianop trained and trained to be proud of being a member of

the First Party. He had fought.

They had been mistaken to expel him from their ranks.

Because, if those mighty seven had included Psianop.

If that day, Psianop had been Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation.

He was sure that they would've been able to win against the True Demon King.

I must have been resolved to die back then, too! That time, when I couldn't chase after the First Party. Even despite how deeply terrifying the True Demon King was. Even if I was waiting for the good luck that kept me alive to run out, for my unavoidable fate... Even then, I...

The dragon claws descended. The speed of the fissures racing through the ground were as fast as flashes of lightning.

Psianop was evading.

Running. Running.

The memories of the past ran through Psianop's heart.

"Ahh... How fantastic. *Gahak, hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo...*!"

It was a story from over twenty-one years ago.

The reason his remorse never faded was because that itself was, at the same time, a point of pride.

Back then, I wished that I could go with everyone. That was the only time.

Her tail swiped across the ground. Psianop avoided the inescapable attack using the fissure that Lucnoca had just split open. Immediately after, the dragon claws from her kick blasted away the terrain at that point, gouging deep into the earth. Psianop evaded her.

Lucnoca's hind limb was taking a step forward.

For just that moment, Psianop was clearly gauging the skeletal structure of his dragon opponent, the shift in body posture that accompanied her attack, and the position where her next step would land.

If she was pursuing him without relying on her five senses...

He could induce this step without changing its aim.

With the weight of his own body, and the terrain destroyed by Sindikar's Lightning Flute, Lucnoca's left forelimb sank.

Naturally, for a massive body like Lucnoca's, it amounted to nothing but a slight hindrance to throw her out of balance.

"Y-you...are..."

"I'm one of the First Party."

To a martial artist, however...

Psianop was already ready and waiting in the spot where Lucnoca's foot stepped down.

"My name! Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation!"

"*Co chwehe*—" (To Kouto wind—)

"No, you don't!"

Her sense of balance had already been destroyed. The instant she stamped down, her center of gravity gave way.

Against an opponent like Lucnoca the Winter, it was finally possible—a full-power blow that had waited for this exact moment.

The extremely sharp strike made the axis of Lucnoca's body weight tilt ever so slightly.

"Forward foot...sweep!"

"...!"

The ground tremored.

Lucnoca the Winter toppled over.

The load of her colossal body was dispersed to areas unable to support it, and in that single second, she collapsed as if she had chosen to tumble over for herself.

The ooze, smaller than a dragon's fist, had sunk the truly strongest living creature into the ground.

"...*Cyul...cas*..." (At the edge of light...)

Despite it all, Lucnoca the Winter still tried to fight.

She was focusing the moment her life ran out, her very final breath, on her Word Arts.

"..."

It seemed as if everything the heavens had bestowed on this beautiful dragon was entirely meant for battle.

However, what about Psianop, on the other hand?

Born with a body not meant for battle, why did he fight?

It wasn't to save the citizens of Aureatia from the threat of winter. He had never considered whether they lived or died from the start.

It wasn't to slay the strongest of all dragons, either. He didn't harbor any hatred for Lucnoca the Winter.

To grasp the honor of the Hero. That also wasn't it. He knew the people who were truly meant to hold such honor.

To obstinately have his own diminutive way, taking on the strongest and insisting that *he* would have been able to defeat the True Demon King.

Even if he believed such himself, that hadn't been it.

...There had once been a day when even he could have fought. Even without the martial prowess he had now, he could have fought as his weak, ignorant self.

Above all, there had been a day when he had clearly seen a proud radiance in his own soul.

"Ahh... Right now... To me, it's what I'm feeling now! I wanted to have the same heart I had that day!"

For courage.

"Lucnoca...the Winter!"

Psianop sent a single blow toward the collapsed dragon...



Nightmarish death completely filled Tuturi the Blue Violet's line of sight.

On the other end of her binoculars, the Cannon Golems and their maintenance team were dead, smashed to pieces by the dirt and sand that followed Lucnoca's attack. When the first section collapsed, she had immediately given the order to withdraw, but they had been annihilated.

The destruction wasn't anything that a withdrawal and a bit of distance could escape.

The manned air balloon team had been completely wiped out save for two squads. Lucnoca's destruction wasn't contained just to the ground. The dirt she kicked up through her writhing final moments certainly hadn't been aimed at the balloons, but nevertheless, they didn't possess Sindikar's level of mobility. Unable to dodge, they were brought down.

She was scared of death.

Not only a fear of her own death. *A fear that their enemy didn't die.*

Even then, she managed to hold on.

Worst of all, she still needed to remain stubborn.

"Psianop."

Although she was observing from a faraway hill, she could clearly recognize it.

She saw the inconceivable.

"...Psianop!"

Lucnoca the Winter had collapsed.

It was something that Vikeon the Smolder, Sindikar the Ark, and even Alus the Star Runner had not been able to accomplish.

She had been the strongest being this world had.

“What the hell, little guy...! You weren’t actually joking?!”

Back then. When Tuturi had talked with him, that ooze had said it with all seriousness.

“...What was it you said—that *you’d beat lightning?*”

She gave an order through the radzio. The squad on the other side had likely seen it for themselves, but she couldn’t waste this golden opportunity.

“Mechbow team fire...! That little guy... Just what the hell’s his deal...?! He actually stopped Lucnoca from moving! This is it... From this position...! We can aim straight at the gap in her dragon scales!”

The mechbow team, readying the decisive volley, was in a cognitive blind spot.

An isolated spot in the middle of dark and vast Mali Wastes, in a different direction from the attacks up until now.

<Mechbows, take aim. >

She heard the sound of the spotter, guiding the mechbow team.

In the darkness, the force all readied their weapons together, and aimed at a single point.

The spotter, with his Clairvoyance, was able to anticipate through the darkness the single second when the barrage—numerous lines of fire mixing together environmental conditions and individual aiming differences—had the highest probability of hitting the target.

<All hands, count to five, then fire. Five. Four. Three... >

Mechbow was their provisional name, but they weren’t actual bows.

Requisitioned from Kaete’s camp, it was a weapon with a name no one in this world should have ever known in the first place.

Nevertheless, Tuturi accurately recognized this weapon’s advantages.

Even in complete darkness that made it impossible to use bows or Word Arts, these weapons, outfitted with third-generation night vision equipment, could take unilateral aim at a target.

With an initial velocity of over two hundred thirty meters per second, their shots were difficult to avoid even with Lucnoca’s

reaction speeds.

Each warhead it launched possessed penetrative capabilities equivalent to eight hundred millimeters of rolled homogenous armor.

<...Two. One.>

“Now... Now! Kill her... Kill that legend!”

It was a portable anti-tank weapon that boasted tremendous destructive power.

In the Beyond, it went by the name “Panzerfaust 3-IT600.”

Flame, and noise, streaked. It was like a meteor shower of destruction.

Explosions, bright as midday, bloomed one after another on Lucnoca’s neck.

The blinding flames lit up the collapsed white dragon’s body.

“...Lucnoca.” Tuturi murmured like a prayer.

The volley wasn’t over.

The squad ready with the next guns continued the barrage of shape-charged warheads.

The nape of her neck, where Alus the Star Runner had seared away her dragon scale defenses in the second match. Alus’s aim in that moment must have been to instantly kill her in the attack as well.

Though she was a dragon, severing her carotid artery would lead to a sudden and fatal drop in blood pressure. The shockwave transmitted from the point of impact would smash her cervical vertebrae and swiftly end her life. This vital point was what the dragon scales had protected before being burned away by the Hillensingen the Luminous Blade.

The edges of Tuturi’s lips trembled as she gazed at the storm of artillery fire.

“Lucnoca... Wait, c’mon.”

...Alus the Star Runner had used up all his magic tools and ripped open a single tear in the absolute legend.

The Aureatian force had gambled on this prestige and schemed to encircle Lucnoca.

Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation’s technique, reached after a long search for truth, delivered a knockout blow.

They had used up the lives of two all-powerful champions, the likes of whom would never be born again, and the power of the world’s grandest military.

All the more reason why, right now, with this opportunity...

"No, no, no, no... Hold on!"

...they needed to kill her, or that would be the end of them.

"Waaait!" Tuturi screamed, paying no heed to the eyes of the soldiers.

It couldn't be.

Her eyes had to be playing tricks on her.

Amidst the bombardment from dozens upon dozens of weapons from the Beyond, Lucnoca was raising her body up.

From atop the faraway hill, Tuturi could see the colossal body moving far too much.

"Th-this...this has to be a joke... W-we're hitting her neck! We're striking her weak point!"

"*Co chwelne.*" (To Kouto winds.)

The feeble, whispering voice was audible even on the far-removed hilltop.

Word Arts were a language that addressed the world.

To Lucnoca the Winter, distance didn't prove to be the slightest barrier at all.

"...Stop. It's pointless. *There's nothing left!* What are we supposed to do?! What should we have done differently?! Just die already! Keel over already!"

The smoke of poison and flame should have been burning her respiratory system.

The weapons from the Beyond should have destroyed the organs she needed to produce sound.

Above all, Psianop's move should have smashed her brain, which governed her speech.

The short break in the incantation...

Felt so terribly...

Long.

"*Cyulcascarz.*" (Wither and fall at the edge of light.)

The air and ground transformed.

Everything died.



The arena was destroyed.

It wasn't limited to just the basin. The Mali Wastes itself were destroyed.

"Lucnoca...the Winter..."

The Ice Arts breath hadn't scored a direct hit.

He had known from estimations beforehand about the vacuum explosion that followed.

Thus, despite getting caught in the vacuum, the strength and technique he had cultivated across twenty-one years ensured Psianop survived the vortex of destruction. Biting into the ground with his pseudopod, he brought his center of gravity low and dispersed the impact...however.

While he may have survived by doing this, what good would it serve?

Psianop's knockout attack didn't succeed in fully killing Lucnoca the Winter.

Even after making Lucnoca the Winter tumble over, it didn't lead to the finishing blow.

As if to interrupt it, the Beyond's weapons flooded her neck area...

...She was bleeding. Nothing more.

"Uhoo, hoo, hoo, hoo! Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo! Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo...! Oh, it's so itchy..."

"...! Why?"

He was dying, so then why, why was she still alive?

Faced with the overwhelming irrationality, he let the disgraceful words slip from his mouth.

During his one, sole moment of opportunity, had his Howling Fluid Heavy Power knockout blow failed to reach her?

Had he missed? Had his training and discipline fallen short?

However, the answer was simple.

He simply didn't want to believe it.

The reason Lucnoca was still alive was nothing more than pure and simple vitality.

"Why don't you die?! Why... Y-you...you..."

He couldn't shift to his next movement.

His strength or skill wasn't the issue.

Lucnoca the Winter had used her Ice Arts breath attack.

Everything began to freeze. A temperature that ended everything and brought it to ruin.

"Why are you so powerful...?!"

“...Whe—*koff*. Where did you go...?”

The colossal being, head stretching up to the heavens, turned her head around.

She was searching for her enemy.

It was different from the instinctual counterattacks from earlier.

Her eyes weren't searching for anything in particular.

It was almost as if she was lost in a daydream.

She held faint anticipation as the ghosts of the past flickered and melted away in her mind.

Maybe if they had undefeated strength. Maybe if long years of devoted study were with them.

Or perhaps the passage of time would overcome her? Maybe if there was a miracle, unlike none of these, brought on by a spiritual radiance, then surely...

Surely. Lucnoca believed that then surely it would turn into a battle.

“There are...even stronger champions wait...ing...right...? Harghent...?”

“*Aughhhhhh! Ahhhhhh!*”

Psianop's voice didn't reach Lucnoca the Winter.

There was nothing reflected in her eyes.

“I—”

Thus, she crushed Psianop offhandedly, as if killing any other ooze.

Not even realizing that he was the powerful fighter she continued to seek.



“...Not yet, *hah-hah*... Not over yet... right...?!”

Tuturi laughed. It came from her lungs convulsing terribly and spitting out air.

Most of the officers at the second command post were dead.

They hadn't been hit directly by the breath at all—the mechbow team had. Her position was level with them, in the complete opposite direction.

Tuturi the Blue Violet was on the verge of death, purely from the sudden hypothermia, and the shockwave from the breath's vacuum aftereffect.

That alone would kill a mere minia.

"Ps-Psianop... You... *Hah-hah*. You were a ridiculous little guy... Just like you said...you actually f-fought...Lucnoca the Winter..."

She had thought it was an incomprehensible level of pride.

However, Psianop really had put his life on the line *for something like that*.

What accumulation of notions and personal ideas had he amassed to accomplish something like that?

It was a willpower bordering on madness that a minian like Tuturi found impossible to believe.

"I won't lose..."

Tuturi tottered through the annihilated camp.

She felt something off in her right hand, and when she looked, she had lost almost half of her palm, from her middle finger to her pinky.

What, is that all? she thought.

"...General Tuturi."

One of the fallen soldiers moaned.

"Let's end this...the operation's failed..."

"Huh?"

Tuturi looked around, but she couldn't tell which direction the voice came from.

From what she saw, the only ones fallen on the ground were dead, or mere moments from death.

Tuturi survived with only losing her palm merely because of a razor-thin difference. When Lucnoca had spit out her Ice Arts breath, Tuturi, observing the battle herself, had managed to instantly fall flat on the ground.

"....."

She couldn't hear any more of the soldier's voice after that.

They must have died.

"...Screw you," Tuturi answered the voice of the unidentified corpse, off in some unknown direction.

Both of her eyes were wide open.

She still needed to fight. She bore that responsibility.

Tuturi had let so many minia die. She had trampled over their honor...

It wasn't worth the cost if Lucnoca the Winter was comfortably left alive.

“See me... If I say I’m gonna do something, I really mean it, all right?! Psianop? He never fled, did he?!”

Tuturi shouted in the middle of all the corpses.

“That piddling little ooze over there fought...and you think any of you could’ve gotten as far as he did against a monster like her?! Huh?!”

At this point, the results were now clear.

Everything was all too late.

Absolutely nothing in the world could match the strongest of all creatures.

“I’ll do it,” Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam murmured like an all-consuming grudge.

There was one final reason why she was meant to fight even knowing it meant death—

Pride.

“Even if Psianop’s dead... Lucnoca the Winter! I’m going take you down!”



Lucnoca wandered the pure white landscape.

Even a dragon like herself would, very rarely, have these sorts of dreams.

One where she’d wander through a white fog, as if everything had frozen over.

She couldn’t even see the ground she was walking on, but there was a faint silhouette within it.

Several familiar figures...of the champions who were etched into her memory.

“Eswilda,” she murmured toward the faceless shadow. “...You’ll catch up to me, won’t you? Even if no others were able to reach me...you, knowing me and still trying to surpass me, might be able to do it. I’m still waiting...for your growth, you know? Won’t you take me on?”

She gave no reply.

The elf had died long, long ago. So far in the past that Lucnoca gave up even trying to count the years.

She walked on through the fog.

“Yushid. Olgis... Alus... I wish I could see you all one more

time.”

It was both a dream, and not a dream.

The all-too-many long years she had lived without anyone ever able to match her—the reality of several hundreds of years.

“I really did like you all.”

All the lives Lucnoca the Winter knew, without exception, were dead.

Merely dying once meant that she could no longer speak with any of them again.

Countless powerful individuals had appeared in front of her, but no matter how many years and months came and went, never once did the dead appear again.

The people who showed her the beauty of courage then died due to that very courage.

Why are you strong?

Lucnoca had been strong from birth. Across the history of the world, she might have been the sole example of such a phenomenon.

She had also spent all her time fighting in order to learn the reason for the power she was given.

However, the ones she battled all equally died like weaklings. Unable to learn the reason she sought, she merely realized for herself the overwhelming isolating gap in power between her and others. The history of combat she amassed only served to make Lucnoca the Winter even stronger, and even more solitary.

Among all the dragons, each one worthy of being called calamitous, she was the strongest individual.

“Why won’t...anyone stay here with me?”

Dragons didn’t shed tears.

However, Lucnoca had always been sad.

With her head cast downward, she walked through the infinitely expanding fog.

“No matter how many words you cast at mere shadows...”

For the first time, someone amidst the fog answered her.

The small, emaciated shade looked to be sitting cross-legged.

“...the only sound that’ll come back is vacant echoes. The silence is all your work.”

“...”

His dried-out black skin was covered in wrinkles, and with his withered physique, it was easy to mistake flesh and bone.

He was a completely bald lycan.

A deceased of a different kind, unknown even to Lucnoca the Winter, having etched the memories of all the champions into her heart.

“...You. When exactly did you get here, then?”

“*Groo, groo, groo.*” The lycan laughed in a low voice.

“When? You’re asking me the question of *when* I came to Nirvana? That’s not the right question, Lucnoca the Winter. The fact you’re able to see my figure here means *you* have come *here*. You understand now, don’t you?”

“Not at all.”

Lucnoca the Winter wasn’t able to think about the meaning behind his words, yet even still, her heart danced innocently.

Perhaps. If there was some other person who would appear. Someone whom she would arrive at in the end.

“Nirvana. Will you fight with me, then?”

“We’ve been fighting a long time.”

“Is that really so?”

That may have been the case. Right now, everything was faint and vague.

“You are definitely fighting right now. Rejoice. That is what has led you here.”

“Really...? Is that what happened? Right now, I...”

A white fog, obscuring the view ahead. A summit where no one would stand as her equal.

It was a deserted and blank scenery where even fighting wasn’t permitted.

“...Ahh.”

If eventually, the end should come...



Lucnoca awoke. The dream had lasted a second, flashing through her hazy cerebral nerve like lightning.

Her dozing lasted for less than a single instant, and yet...

“*Popoperopa.*” (To Psianop’s pulsation.)

Word Arts. The voice resounded from the base of her neck.

A single being, now exposed due to her dragon scales being seared off, could be seen clinging to her nape.

It was a diminutive creature she had crushed with her dragon's claws without even realizing it.

How exactly had he come from the frozen soil back up to her neck again?

It had been an extremely short second of sleep.

Even the apex martial artist wasn't able to estimate the power of Lucnoca the Winter.

However, if it was an attack he had been hit with once before, he then learned a certain truth.

If he used his technique to turn the force aside, he *could leave his nucleus behind and die* after the dragon's claw attack.

"Parpepy. Peep por ppe. Por pupeon." (To Psianop's pulsation. Suspended ripple. Tie the sequence. Full large moon.)

He knew one certain truth.

Lucnoca the Winter said she was *itchy*. Now that she had said something like that, he knew that she definitely wasn't bluffing or challenging him, and she truly meant it.

The dermal itchiness brought on by the stimulation of her skin made her reflexively and unconsciously scratch.

In her hazy consciousness from the hit to her brain, Lucnoca touched her own weakness, the left side of the cranium—the claws that had just smashed Psianop. He had grabbed on to her dragon claws the instant he was hit with Lucnoca's attack. Of course, he would pay for this method with his life. However—

He knew one certain truth.

Five years with each use. Within his cellular life span of fifty years, he had spent twenty-one of them, and during the remaining twenty-nine years, he had used up twenty-five years of total regeneration. Even then.

Half regeneration, using up two and a half years, was still possible.

Then, the remaining half of the dragon claw's force, enough to erase all his cells with a single touch—

"Perpipoer." (Circulate.) "Lucnoca the Winter."

—was blocked by a black dragon scale.

It was a fragment of Vikeon the Smolder that had shattered and

scattered in the middle of their intense battle.

“If...you are going to...trample over...your fated death...then I’ll do the same.”

Then, the single point Psianop targeted—

That position, where Lucnoca herself had carried him up—where her scales had been lost in the first round from Alus the Star Runner’s attack with Hillensingen the Luminous Blade, that had turned painful and itchy from the combined assault of Tuturi’s troops, and where Psianop had hit her with a fatal blow once already—the left side of the all-powerful dragon’s head.

“I’ll give you a *second* knockout blow!”

He spread his pseudopod out wide on the base of Lucnoca’s neck.

He stepped firmly down onto it. The nape of her neck where she had lost her dragon scale was right before his eyes.

Weight. Movement. Force. Technique.

Psianop needed to drive his very life force, everything he had, into her.

The dignity of battle he shared with Qwell.

The twenty-one years of training he spent in the Sand Labyrinth.

The remorse for being unable to slay the True Demon King.

The wonderful days he spent with the First Party.

To defeat.

To defeat.

Psianop had reached this far in order to defeat something.

The technique that defeated Neft the Nirvana.

The move that Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation had created himself.

The skill that only the martial artist in the First Party, the one who was meant to defeat the demon king, could utilize.

Its name—

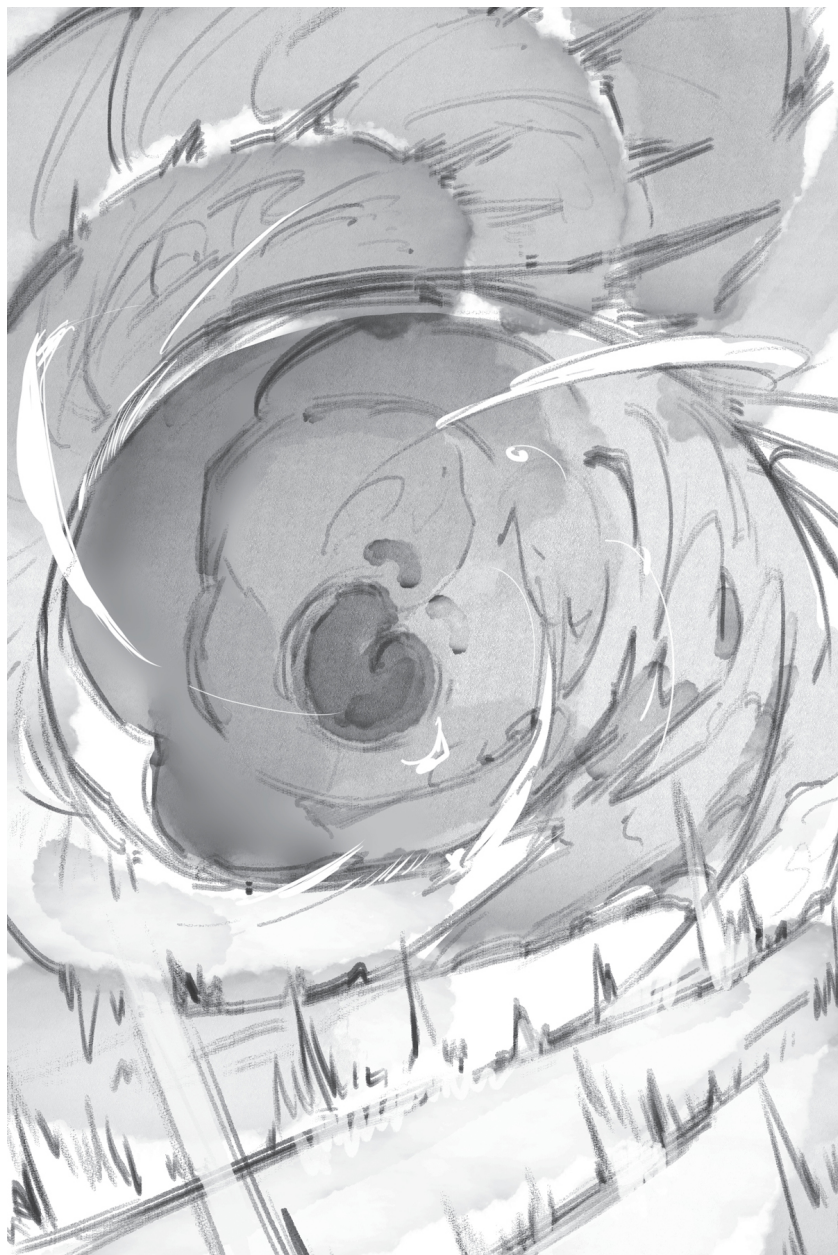
“Howling Liquid Heavy Power!”

“*Kwaugh, hrngh, hooo!*”

The impact he sent into her, using up everything he had within him, raged even harder inside her skull, as if transmitted through

the traces of the wounds he had already carved into her brain once before.

The attack to the back of her neck destroyed her cerebral peduncle, reaching all the way to the interbrain.



“Hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo...”

Lucnoca the Winter laughed.

Perhaps it only appeared like that was the case.

Just as it had been up until now, she could do battle, even with her reflexive actions taken moments before death.

The strongest of all dragons, with her brain thoroughly destroyed, still didn't stop.

Psianop too tried to fight on further.

Dragon claws closed in on Psianop right after he delivered his blow.

“...Neutralizing...Power...!”

The attack was impossible either to defend or evade.

Even with Psianop's technique, he was going to be smashed to pieces, defenses and all—

However, right at that moment, an explosive light flashed.

“Psianop!”

There was the light of a steam automobile.

Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam had just fired a mechbow from inside the car.

Nothing more than a coincidence.

Hit with a shot from the Beyond's strongest portable weapon, the trajectory of the claws shifted ever so slightly.

This attack, sent in Lucnoca's dying moments, grazed Psianop.

“...”

Psianop had fallen onto the ground.

At the same moment, the strongest dragon this world knew collapsed as well.



Two moons looked down from above the frigid night sky.

“Hoo, hoo-hoo...hoo-hoo-hoo...”

Lucnoca the Winter was laughing. Laughing like a young girl.

Everything, absolutely all of it, seemed like a beautiful dream.

“...Psia...nop. Ahh... The Inexhaus...tible...Stagnation...”

It was a champion's name. She would never forget it.

Up until her final moments, the memories of her beloved champions were hers and hers alone.

“...Lucnoca...the Winter...”

There was a voice. Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation.

Had the final attack Lucnoca sent at him finally taken his life?

Her eyes could no longer see anything, but she wanted to believe she hadn't.

“Right now, what're you thinking...at your undeniable end...the moment of defeat...?”

As long as one continued to fight without end, they were fated to one day face defeat.

Even truly the most powerful being of all couldn't escape from such an end.

What a ruthless truth indeed.

Lucnoca the Winter had kept on witnessing herself, always and forever.

“Uhoo, hoo-hoo...hoo, hoo...”

“...”

“It was the same...for all of them...fight and fight...up until the end...and then they died.”

She had yearned for that brilliance, the thing that she was never able to have for herself, thinking it was precious and sacred.

The courage, and recklessness, to challenge a foe of absolute might. She believed that such a heart was the most beautiful thing of all.

She had loved them.

“I'm going...to the same place...they all are...”

“...”

No matter who they may be, as long as they continued to fight, they would arrive at that place.

The champions that she would never be able to meet again were all there.

She had wanted so desperately to be pushed to the end of her strength... To see the end of battle...

“I...”

Psianop groaned.

“Lucnoca...the Winter. You couldn't...have used up all your strength in this battle. This fight wasn't one-on-one. I even knew this myself, and overlooked it. I wasn't... Lucnoca the Winter. I wasn't able to overcome you.

“...Ahh. Is that how it was? Uhoo, hoo, hoo...”

Lucnoca the Winter was laughing.

What a trivial thing to care about, indeed.

She had used all her might.

She managed to use all of her might, to the point that she *struggled for her life*.

Just how exactly was she supposed to have any more power than that?

No matter how many opponents she had faced. No matter what methods they had used against her.

In all her years, there had never been a battle where she was able to give her all.

“So fun...*ahh*, it was so very fun...too fun, even...*hoo-hoo-hoo...*”

Winter, the incarnation of despair, thought so.

“...I never...even noticed...any of that...”

Everything was so terribly silent.

It seemed as if the world itself was gently falling asleep.

A single season came to an end.

“...I won.”

As if dragging out the slight bit of life he had left, a single ooze departed.

Compared to the legend, the harbinger of the end, he was nothing but a terribly small weakling.

However, that weakling had won, and survived.

“I...won. Qwell...”

Ninth match. Winner, Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation.

The spacious marble room had a far chillier impression than the actual temperature suggested.

While the reception hall had been owned by aristocratic lineages from the time of the Central Kingdom, Iriolde the Atypical Tome could use such facilities freely regardless of whether he was invited or not.

“The True Demon King. A name that now brings back fond memories.”

Sitting across the large table from Rosclay the Absolute, it appeared that the outrageous comment wasn’t silly nonsense or a bluff, but words spoken truly from the heart.

There wasn’t anyone who could talk of the True Demon King like they were a bygone terror. Fully understanding this for himself, Iriolde was still able to pretend otherwise. His voice and way of speaking were one aspect of the power that made Iriolde the Atypical Tome the Fifth Minister once before, bringing him to the nucleus of Aureatia.

“The days and months pass by so very quickly. Now, the people appear to fear a new threat in place of the True Demon King, yes...? I imagine you must be at quite a loss yourself about how to soothe them, Rosclay.”

“No, never.”

Rosclay flashed a perfectly symmetrical smile.

On his left sat Ninth General Yaniegiz the Chisel, keeping a strained and tense watch over Iriolde’s every move. The only others present were Iriolde’s four bodyguards.

Aureatia’s light and shadow. Rosclay and Iriolde hadn’t directly confronted each other like this since Iriolde had been expelled.

“As you’re well aware, we used Aureatia’s might to take down Alus the Star Runner. Similarly, Lucnoca the Winter...can no longer become a demon king at this point.”

“Impressive, Rosclay the Absolute. Correct...you seem to have a very correct understanding of the situation.”

Iriolde extended a gnarled fingertip from his pure white robe.

“The monster’s death brings a true sense of relief. The strongest of all dragons, a potential threat to Aureatia...and to the last habitat of the minian races, has finally been killed. A truly joyous event, yes...”

“I agree. Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation, having defeated Lucnoca the Winter, is a powerful champion worthy of the title of Hero. He gives hope for the future of the Sixways Exhibition.”

No matter how detached from the actual reality of events it was, Rosclay had to treat it as such.

Without any civilians to witness it, they needed to prove that Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation was a champion who defeated Lucnoca the Winter in a just fight, and eventually prove that the True Hero surpassed this strength.

“Psianop. Oh yes, Psianop, hmm... An ooze killed the strongest dragon in history. Who is going to believe that...? Even at this stage, you still plan on holding the matches, do you?”

Iriolde the Atypical Tome revealing himself on the main stage and setting up a personal meeting with Rosclay like this—it could only mean one thing.

“True duel matches to determine the True Hero. There’s no longer any need...to keep up this charade. I believe we both already know...a way to ensure there won’t be any more needless damages and sacrifices...”

The winds of the political strife had firmly shifted.

He was conveying to Rosclay his declaration of victory over Aureatia’s political regime.

Iriolde, as he hid in the shadows behind Haade, wasn’t fixed on winning the Sixways Exhibition. His aim was to obtain the status of a champion on par with the True Hero through far more direct methods.

Famed to be the strongest to ever have lived, Lucnoca the Winter had indeed been worthy of such an achievement.

In all of history, there hadn’t been anyone capable of bringing her down. She was a legend who had been around far longer than the True Demon King.

“I don’t believe that suspending the Sixways Exhibition is the method.”

“Rosclay. You... You’re still young. A wonderful thing. However, as a result, you lagged one step behind the gambit to slay Lucnoca... Haade the Flashpoint acted far more quickly than you

did. He got out ahead of you and resolved to protect the citizens of Aureatia, regardless of how much of his military force he needed to exhaust to do so.”

While possessing a military force on par or potentially surpassing the reformation faction, Iriolde hadn’t kept it for the military confrontation during the overthrow of Aureatia, but instead, he trained it on Lucnoca to gain superior legitimacy over the reformation faction.

No matter how much power Iriolde’s camp may have possessed, given their position as usurpers, they lacked this legitimacy. If they truly got the people on their side, they would resolve the general situation without it ever reaching a military confrontation. Suspending the Sixways Exhibition was the first step.

“In another pleasing turn of events, Haade shares my feelings as well... He believes that the Sixways Exhibition is nothing but a disaster for Aureatia, inviting Alus the Star Runner, Lucnoca the Winter...Kiyazuna the Axle, this vampire group, and other such individuals... The safety of the citizenry is more important than the renown of the Hero. I am sure you agree with me in that regard...”

“With all due respect... Minister Iriolde. Authority over the continuation of the Sixways Exhibition lies with the Aureatia Assembly and Her Majesty the Queen. No matter what situation may arise, Aureatia’s prestige is staked on seeing it through to the end. In other words, it is not something that can be influenced by my opinion or yours.”

“Oh, no, no, no... *Heh-heh-heh.*”

Iriolde laughed, looking deeply amused, before repeating Rosclay’s words.

“No matter what situation may arise.”

Even Rosclay, with his clear intellect and insight, when confronted with the man, was unable to read Iriolde’s true intentions.

Iriolde possessed terrifying and extraordinary powers all his own.

“...Thinking on it now, it’s been nothing but that kind of talk during this whole event. *Unrivaled* superpowered abilities. *Deathly* sublime technique. *Undefeated* myths. An *absolute* champion. *Heh-heh*. Pleasing, hollow words, yes? It’s as if you almost want such things to exist.”

“...”

“No matter what situation may arise.’ You said it yourself. The question then is, has everything in this battle been within the scope of your expectations?”

Though he knew Iriolde was inciting him, Rosclay couldn’t help turning the question over in his thoughts.

Mainly since it was an instinctual habit that Rosclay had ingrained in himself.

Kia the World Word. Perhaps that would fit the bill.

The young girl who nearly ruined Rosclay’s whole plan from the very first round.

There still wasn’t anyone who had a grasp on exactly what level of Word Arts user she was. His knees, destroyed with just a single word from Kia, would cost a small fortune to treat.

What of the hypothesis that this was all a part of Iriolde’s plot?

No.

That incident had to have been a scheme of Elea the Red Tag alone.

If someone else had backed Elea, she would have found a pawn to put forward that was far more suitable and easier to rein in than Jivlart the Ash Border.

The reason Elea the Red Tag failed in her rebellion despite having such a powerful player under her control was that she was alone...and had to carry everything out by herself, not even conspiring with Kia.

What about the possibility that Iriolde arranged for Lucnoca the Winter to join the tournament?

If there was another unforeseen matter, it was the presence of Lucnoca the Winter.

Quite capable of bringing ruin to Aureatia herself, it was realistically impossible for Rosclay’s camp to remove her as they first expected to—a subjugation prompted by labeling her a self-proclaimed demon king.

The possibility that there was a backer of some kind behind Harghent’s quest to find her.

“Now then, Minister Iriolde. I could take that to mean you expected everything. Is it safe to assume that would include Lucnoca the Winter’s involvement as well?”

“Kweh-heh-heh. I’m not falling for that... I’m diametrically opposed to doctrines of destruction. I’ve never thought even in my wildest dreams about destroying Aureatia. The one who invited

Lucnoca the Winter... Oh, what was it again...? I don't remember his name, but it was just pure folly."

"Yes, I think so as well. Even you can't keep everything cleanly in the palm of your hand."

Iriolde's camp intended to saddle Lucnoca the Winter with the role of killable demon king, as the new threat to the minian races following the True Demon King.

There was never any guarantee of success, even if he had such a plan from the start.

He's not lying... They weren't manipulating Harghent, nor did they anticipate Lucnoca the Winter's presence...

If there was a duty to search out Lucnoca, they had plenty of people more capable than Harghent to choose from. Was there anyone who could have ever imagined that he would manage to successfully negotiate with Lucnoca the Winter? It had been impossible for even Alus the Star Runner to accurately gauge the legendary dragon's power.

Rosclay judged that these unforeseen developments on his end hadn't been set up from the beginning by Iriolde.

...He's just spouting words to confuse me. My hypotheses haven't given way yet.

"You're really thinking, aren't you, Rosclay? Your abilities to meditate and speculate on things are truly wonderful. It's...a strength far greater than what the citizens esteem you for. Far more wonderful than that 'Absolute' second name of yours..."

"Yes. My second name is indeed Absolute. Minister Iriolde, since we've been gifted with this opportunity to chat, I wouldn't want to bother you with idle talk."

"*Kweh-heh-heh*. Don't say that. You aren't at all interested in joining hands without a struggle and moving Aureatia forward together? That proposal...is why I'm here talking to you in person. If you act now...no one will be hurt."

Even Iriolde must not have thought that these words would seriously change Rosclay's mind.

He had arranged this sparsely attended meeting to make it clear that he had more than enough chance of victory. He was trying to plant a seed of doubt in Rosclay that he had contact with others like this and to make Rosclay's camp fall into dysfunction.

"I wish to entrust the government with you...to the young... I truly wish for it. A new country needs to begin. Aureatia is meant to

be reformed.”

Aureatia needed to be reformed. Rosclay was thinking the same thing.

However, not through Iriolde’s methods.

If they tried to control this world without eradicating the terror of the True Demon King, that terror was bound to one day bring it all down. Even right now, with all focus on the Sixways Exhibition, there were signs of it.

Both Rosclay and Jelky wanted a Hero because they understood the terror the people felt.

“Rosclay the Absolute. I wonder if that second name hasn’t become a bit empty. Can you vow that there isn’t any part of your heart that resents the foolish people...? We gave the citizens too much freedom. We accidentally gave them the freedom to depend on champions, to fear, and to go mad. The terror of the True Demon King. Belief and faith in champions. The nonstop influx of culture from the Beyond. Mutant species. Visitors. A future where all such elements of chaos are put in order is guaranteed to become a world that needs no artificial hero...”

“...I intended on keeping quiet, but...”

Yaniegiz the Chisel had indeed kept silent up until that moment.

He kicked back his chair, standing up, and even began to put his hand on his sword.

Iriolde’s elven bodyguards immediately took aim at Yaniegiz. He continued to talk without paying them any thought.

“I have to ask...just how long is some crusty old codger...not even a bureaucrat steering the government...going to mistakenly believe he’s standing on equal footing here?! You think that Rosclay is going to lose to someone like—”

“Hmm? He’s already lost, hasn’t he?”

Iriolde actually looked happy as he replied.

“You already lost a long time ago, ever since you were made to choose the bracket that had you facing Haade in the second round... Am I wrong, Rosclay?”

“...Well.”

Rosclay the Absolute held the power to determine a tournament schedule that guaranteed him victory.

That very fact had been the strongest card that even a normal person like Rosclay could play within the Sixways Exhibition, where

monsters that eclipsed the very limit of imagination gathered.

“*Kweh-heh*. You see... I understand your feelings very well, Rosclay. There isn’t anyone capable of constant, nonstop success... no one who can pick out the correct answer from all possible options without ever making an error. Despite that, there are so many imbeciles like that Yaniegiz over there who irresponsibly seek perfection from others.”

“The meeting’s over! Iriolde!”

Yaniegiz appeared on the verge of cutting Iriolde down, regardless of the consequences.

“I suppose that is the wise choice here.”

Iriolde slowly stood up.

Right before he left the room, he looked at Rosclay and twisted his mouth up.

“There’s no one who will understand you.”

“...”

Rosclay had no words to shoot back at him.

Left behind with Yaniegiz in the white hall, and maintaining the silence in the room, Rosclay might have come across as a pitiful, defeated loser.

“Yaniegiz.”

“Yes?”

However, Rosclay the Absolute was a champion who had continued to win by inevitability.

The expression Rosclay wore in such moments was different from Iriolde’s.

He wasn’t smiling.

“You played your part well.”



Haade the Flashpoint, like any other day, sat his sturdy physique in the chair inside the barracks office.

This man, leading Aureatia’s largest military division, was the strongest pawn of all under Iriolde the Atypical Tome’s command.

Behind him was a large window looking out into the courtyard.

In order to ward against sniper fire, it certainly didn’t have a fantastic view, but the room did get a fair amount of sunlight.

He was quite fond of the room.

"Might be my last time with this view."

The time to act was approaching.

Haade could say that all of his preparations had progressed just for this day.

Both Alus the Star Runner and Lucnoca the Winter had been tremendous foes capable of annihilating Aureatia, Haade's most desperate moves against them still proving not enough; but for him, it hadn't been the best fight of all.

He asked the middle-aged female staff officer, "How'd things fare?"

"Not particularly well."

She seemed to have a slight bit of confusion in her tone.

He might have indeed given her rather incomprehensible orders.

"It would be one thing if we were using the same chain of command we've always used within the army, but establishing an independent communications network within His Excellency Iriolde's private forces and the National Defense Research Institute...could instead disrupt control and invite disorder."

"That's the promise I got from old man Iriolde, okay? As a *reward* for slaying Lucnoca, I'll be able to deploy all the camp's troops."

Tuturi and Psianop's brave efforts had been more than Haade had expected.

In which case, missing this chance to efficiently use their accomplishments wasn't an option.

If he was going to start a war anyway, then he'd rather have one that got the whole army involved.

"However, to mobilize the army while Lord Iriolde is currently in the middle of negotiations..."

"Don't worry. Everything's set to go smoothly."

The most difficult operation of all, killing Lucnoca the Winter, had been successful.

The job from here on out was like his long-awaited deserts.

"Hey, this job ain't too hard."

His force would move. Blood on a scale hereto unseen would flow.

The premonition of the imminent heat made Haade's lips curl up into a smile.

Since the era of the True Demon King, no matter how much hell

he witnessed, no matter how many nightmares he tasted, even if the world regained its peace, he would never forget that heat.

The heat of war.

“We’re just going to crush the Sixways Exhibition, that’s all.”

The second round, match ten.

Swordsmanship and stratagems. It was a desperate struggle of minia between minians who both stood far above all others, while simultaneously, a certain fight for all, where the two biggest forces in Aureatia, squirming behind these shura’s backs, would collide.

A *political contest* on the biggest possible scale.

There was one self-proclaimed demon king who was a part of Iriolde's camp, but who never joined the operation to take down Lucnoca the Winter. Miluzi the Coffin Edict was incorporated into the National Defense Research Institute, along with Enu the Distant Mirror.

Of course, in light of the potential research and development time requirements, Miluzi could have never created any weapons to cope with Lucnoca, only joining the Institute after the end of the first round. Currently, the role he had been given was mainly to operate and maintain the various types of state-of-the-art machinery at the National Defense Research Institute as well as develop weapons with *the next operation* in mind.

"...I would like to try creating a golem with a heart," Miluzi murmured, but the words may not have actually been directed at Enu, standing beside him.

He was gazing at the golems lined up in the hangar. Almost all of them were creations of Kiyazuna the Axle that Tuturi had requisitioned from Kaete's camp.

Although they were both self-proclaimed demon kings with superb Craft Arts who researched golems, everyone knew that there was a vast gulf in ability between Kiyazuna and Miluzi.

"By that, you mean like Mestelexil the Box of Desperate Knowledge?"

"Copying Kiyazuna the Axle...isn't necessarily what I'm trying to do. However, at this age, I feel like I understand what she was talking about now. For those like us, who've dedicated our lives to Craft Arts, a golem with a heart built by your own hands...truly is like a child for us."

"You plan to make one for yourself?"

"Yes. That's what I hope to do. There's no limit on budget or materials here. I can even ask for additional manpower to help, too. There's no need to escape the eyes of the kingdom, either. It's like the country I once built before... I'll be able to devote myself entirely to my final research."

Miluzi smiled.

He was an elderly man with a gentle temperament rarely seen in a self-proclaimed demon king.

Nevertheless, Enu understood the danger that lay beneath it.

At this point, Miluzi was only living to find and come up with the logical conclusion to his life. He would do anything in its pursuit.

“...For the National Defense Research Institute, nothing’s a problem as long as you get results. No matter whose motives are pushing you forward, for example. I’m expecting great things.”

Miluzi the Coffin Edict was infiltrating the National Defense Research Institute under the control of Linaris the Obsidian. His objective was to investigate the internal affairs at the Institute, and to keep watch over Enu.

It was dangerous for Miluzi to work with Enu too much.

Not that I am in any position to comment on the danger of others, Enu thought as he departed.

Behind his forward-facing position as Aureatia’s Thirteenth Minister, Enu the Distant Mirror had continued to work behind the scenes providing living vampire specimens to the National Defense Research Institute. It was a scheme that had begun before the start of the Sixways Exhibition, and one worth spending the entirety of Enu’s own life on.

Even after he was defeated by Obsidian Eyes prior to the start of the Sixways Exhibition and stood as a puppet sponsor for Zeljirga the Abyss Web, this goal remained unchanged. While he kept himself alive, walking the thin tightrope with his utility as a sponsor and by sharing internal information from the Twenty-Nine Officials, he continued to maintain his link to the National Defense Research Institute.

Presently, Obsidian Eyes successfully gained control of Mestelexil through his match against Zeljirga, and forced the separate pawn under their control, Miluzi the Coffin Edict, to infiltrate the National Defense Research Institute. Linaris’s guild’s reason for continuing to keep Enu alive, with his utility as one of the Twenty-Nine Officials now gone, had almost disappeared entirely.

Nevertheless, Enu’s goal was near at hand.

Linaris the Obsidian herself was a mutant strain of vampire who concealed the chance for him to take great strides toward what he

sought. Now that he had come this far, he couldn't let himself give up on anything.

Iriolde and the others planned on sparking a large-scale conflict soon. The time had come when everyone would be forced to act.

...I suppose I need to come up with the conclusion to my own life, as well.

When Enu visited the biological experiment building, Viga the Clamor was washing her hands.

There was a detailed blood spray scattered over the apron she wore.

Viga had apparently committed a large-scale weapon to the operation against Lucnoca the Winter; however, she didn't seem any different.

"Viga. How is your research going?"

"Hmmm. Good question."

Ever since he first affiliated with Aureatia, he had an understanding with Viga, also part of the National Defense Research Institute.

Enu's continued collecting of vampire specimens was to assist in the job he entrusted her with.

"The revenant I deployed during the ninth match was destroyed, but...I also sort of feel like it'd be better to repair and fix weapons that have a high level of perfection already."

"Will you make it in time? Haade and the others will likely coordinate their action with the start of the tenth match. Though I imagine that Rosclay will try to delay the start of the match as long as he can, too..."

While it appeared to be trivial chitchat, there was a different meaning underneath both of their words.

There was research *Enu had personally commissioned* prior to the Sixways Exhibition. Would she be able to finish it before the plan to overthrow Aureatia began?

"Hmm, well. It won't take much time if I use the stuff I already have."

"...I see. Would it be difficult to reproduce them instead of fixing them?"

"As expected from their high level of perfection, there's a bit of a limit to their reproducibility, I'd say."

There was a limit to what she could extract from corpses. It

meant she needed the real thing, an actual vampire specimen.

A completed mutation at that—she desired the living cells of Linaris the Obsidian.

“I see. I’ll arrange for as much as I am able to.”

“Be careful out there. Ever since the Alus the Star Runner affair, there’s been talk of corpse spread and all.”

“Hmm. Were you just in the middle of making the serum, then?”

On the autopsy table lay the body of a naked woman without a head. It was the corpse that Viga had just been cutting open before his arrival. It was beginning to spread among the citizens that Qwell the Moon Flower’s whereabouts were unknown as of the beginning of the ninth match.

“Oh, oh, interested in the dissection, are we?”

“No. It’s embarrassing to admit given my work involves vampires, but I’m a bit weak around blood.”

If he was in contact for too long, he might arouse suspicion among the other Obsidian Eyes corpses who had likely infiltrated the Institute along with Miluzi. Though not going along with Viga’s perverse tastes in entertainment was part of it as well.

“Sorry for bothering you. I’m hoping for good results.”

“Thank you.”

Enu hadn’t handed anything over to Viga. However, from her position looking back in Enu’s direction, she should have been able to notice the new vial on the shelf behind him. A cell sample he had gathered from Miluzi the Coffin Edict.

This still won’t be enough. Former Obsidian Eyes agents... There’s Kuuro the Cautious.

If he gained Kuuro’s assistance, perhaps he would be able to make direct contact with Linaris once more.

The outbreak of large-scale war and panic was growing close at hand.

He needed a means of uniting wills with a vampire’s power while, at the same time, *not being under their control.*

I need to finish them as fast as possible. The krsnik.

Miluzi and Viga were not the only ones trying to accomplish something through a new type of construct.



Ever since she had been carried back to the mansion, Linaris was retired in her bedchambers. For a full two days' time, Yuno the Distant Claw hadn't been allowed to see her.

The air raid by Alus the Star Runner had occurred right after, and Yuno even had the terrible thought that perhaps Linaris was already long dead.

Yuno had not seen the "father" figure that Linaris spoke of—she worried that before she knew it, Linaris might faintly disappear, and in the same way as him, become someone spoken of as if still alive, and nothing more.

Therefore, when she was finally given permission to meet with Linaris, Yuno felt a sense of relief more than anything else.

"Linaris."

She scurried over to the side of the bed.

Linaris's petite face, appearing isolated in the middle of the large bed, truly did seem like the face of the dead.

"...Miss Yuno."

"You don't need to tell me what happened or anything... Are you all right?"

Why had that simple outing on the day of the eighth match ended up exhausting her so much? She looked haggard, as if not only her body but her mind had been devastated as well.

Despite surely having a fever of some kind, Linaris was even whiter than Yuno, who was in perfect health. Perhaps it was due to her pale complexion.

Gripping Linaris's head, Yuno could barely feel any heat from her body, and Yuno's sense of relief gradually transformed into anxiety.

"Sh-she still hasn't healed yet?"

Yuno asked the elderly leprechaun woman in waiting beside the bed.

She was the matron of the house, Frey the Waking.

"Although we avoided the worst possible situation... unfortunately, she still has yet to recover. Our lady's Life Art treatments up until now had also been handled by Hartl...Hartl the Light Pinch. These senile old Word Arts of mine... They simply... they simply aren't up to the task...!"

A tear fell from the usually mild and coolheaded Frey's eyes.

Feeling awkward, as if she had witnessed something she wasn't meant to see, Yuno couldn't help averting her gaze.

“...Where is Hartl then?”

It was the name of the lycan that would occasionally come and go from the mansion.

However, both Frey and Linaris responded to Yuno’s question with only silence.

“Okay... Okay, then the only option’s to call a doctor from somewhere else, right?!”

“Miss Yuno... But that would mean...”

“I know. You people can’t openly ask Aureatia for any help. All of Aureatia’s doctors are under the control of Minister Flinsuda for one, and there’s a chance information could get leaked to the Aureatia Assembly...!”

Linaris and her group were enemies of order.

Just how different were they from Yuno’s hated foe, Kiyazuna the Axle?

However, right now Yuno was a broken failure. Even then, she wanted to help.

“In that case, you just have to get help from someone *who’s not on Aureatia’s side*...! I know someone like that! And they even have a really skilled doctor with them, too!”

Having betrayed Aureatia, there was one camp Yuno could think of that she could ask for help.

She had met him only once, during the sniper attack right before the start of the third match.

He possessed a superpower that defied observation. A fateful superpower that made him present for opportunities and forming cooperative relationships.

“Hiroto the Paradox! Let me meet with the Gray-Haired Child!”

“...!”

Yuno could tell Linaris’s breath caught in her throat.

“That will not happen, Miss Yuno. Right now, our relationship with the Gray-Haired Child is—”

Frey’s objection was cut short.

Linaris’s white hand was gently touching Frey’s own.

Yuno wondered if she was telling Frey to let her go.

“Linaris.”

“...”

She gripped Linaris’s soft hand.

Weak, fleeting. Even then, Yuno thought she was beautiful.

She didn’t want to lose something beautiful right before her

eyes ever again.

“It’s okay... You’re worried about General Haade’s movements, right?”

Yuno felt the slightest bit of strength in Linaris’s fingers as she gripped down.

There was a secret they shared on the day they first met.

From the “cerebrum” to the “brain stem.” Depending on results, may be necessary to adjust “terminus excision” period.

The letter Haade the Flashpoint had written to the high ranks within his camp.

“I know it’s dangerous, but I can even use that as a bargaining chip. Besides I’m...I’m still a Nagan scholar, and the one who discovered Soujirou the Willow-Sword.”

She stared into Linaris’s golden eyes in order to show her the look in Yuno’s own.

“Frey. Get ready to depart. Assign someone to keep watch over me and silence me if necessary to ensure that I don’t leak any information on Obsidian Eyes.”

“You really will...try to save our lady, Miss Yuno?”

“...I will. I may be...a totally hopeless and miserable child, but...”

She retied her shoelaces. She might have been unconsciously smiling.

Yuno never thought she’d be capable of something so preposterous and outside of her quest for revenge.

“Who wouldn’t try to save a friend?”

The Aureatia branch of Okafu's Dignitary Parlor. A reception room that Hiroto the Paradox installed in an upper-class residential area.

However, today was one time when it was difficult to label Hiroto the Paradox as the master of the parlor—as long as it bore the name of the Okafu Dignitary Parlor, then the true lord of Okafu himself needed to always be on the side receiving guests.

“Bestowing special second-class citizenship to all the goblins residing in Aureatia, and an exception from residency taxes, carrying into the future.”

The mustached man with a brawny, bestial physique flipped through the missive dispatched from Aureatia.

He was the self-proclaimed demon king who commanded the Free City of Okafu, Morio the Sentinel. Visiting Aureatia that day in response to a request for a meeting with the Aureatia Assembly, he was consulting with Hiroto, whom he hadn't seen since the start of the Sixways Exhibition.

“Since this is a first-time privilege for any of the monstrous races, any other goblins seeking Aureatian citizenship will have to undergo a screening process. The various economic sanctions against the Free City of Okafu will be lifted, and Hiroto the Paradox will be allowed to stay and be treated as a high-level secretary... The Free City of Okafu will be officially brought under the Kingdom's umbrella... What? I don't like that part one bit.”

Morio arched his eyebrows.

The stamped missive, outlining the details of the settlement on a bunch of high-quality colored paper, carried the same effect here in this world because it lacked a clear common language, like the official proclamations of the Beyond.

“But this isn't so bad for you, is it? The arrangements in your original plan were that the goblins would gain slave-class status. Hiroto the Paradox, why get upset about second-class citizenship?”

A gray-haired young boy, looking in his late teens, sat across from Morio. The gap in appearance between them was even grander than a normal adult and child, yet in a certain way, they were

exactly the same—the two were both visitors arriving from the Beyond.

“Second-class citizenship means the privilege ends after one generation. In order to establish more goblins on this continent than there currently are...going forward, they will need to undergo Aureatia’s screening process to earn citizenship, even if they are born here. That is most likely what the Aureatia Assembly is aiming for.”

“...I get it. A generation for goblins is short. So to Aureatia, exempting them from residency taxes won’t be costly. Once they consent to this agreement, fighting back against the screening process and making more goblins flow in would be labeled an act of aggression.

“Second-class citizenship exempting them from work service will shackle us in terms of our goals. I had imagined that by having goblins settle into a slave class within this society, they could use their hard work to show how beneficial they are, gradually permeating minian society... In the end, now that we have been defeated in the Sixways Exhibition, we don’t have the power to force through only our demands.”

“So then, the other side made this move understanding all of that. Getting interesting now, isn’t it? Well, when I think of who’s sharp enough for this, it’s gotta be Jelly the Swift Ink...”

Morio laughed in delight.

The strong and powerful in Aureatia didn’t begin and end with the one who previously engaged him in a life-or-death struggle, Sabfom the White Weave.

“Mr. Morio Ariyama. Is the Okafu army still maintaining their fighting strength?”

“They absolutely aren’t maintaining it, but they still *can* fight, at least. Basically, like its heart gave out a long time ago, and your money’s the blood transfusions it needs to keep it alive. Won’t hold out for long.”

Zigita Zogi had been defeated and left behind. Hiroto the Paradox had been politically defeated as well.

The lifting of Morio’s designation as a self-proclaimed demon king in essence meant that, to Aureatia, Morio and the Free City of Okafu could no longer pose any threat.

No matter how many losses the Aureatia army incurred in Alus the Star Runner’s attack, if the two nations were to clash, it would

likely be a one-sided loss for Okafu. The outflow of both capital and personnel as a result of suspending mercenary work in exchange for Sixways Exhibition participation had been far too great.

“You’re not gonna start talking about kicking up a war in a situation like this, right? I get that Zigita Zogi got killed, but...I’m sure as hell not going along with your self-destruction.”

Given that Zigita Zogi’s sponsor, Dant the Heath Furrow, wasn’t in the room, Morio had misgivings about the chances of such a proposal. Hiroto might kick up a large-scale uprising that included not only Okafu, but even middle-class citizens he had built connections with in Aureatia, and end up ruining all the results they had gained.

In such a case, what was the correct course of action? At the very least, he’d need to take Hiroto’s head right now and bring it to his negotiations with the Aureatia Assembly afterward.

It ran counter to Morio’s sense of justice to involve not warriors, but civilians.

Not that I really want to do it, though, he thought as he focused on the position of the knife he wore behind his back.

Regardless of how it had all played out, Morio had also gambled on Hiroto by his own judgment. It didn’t make sense that he should cut Hiroto down and be the only one to survive.

Hiroto began to speak. “I won’t deploy the army yet. However, the time when it will become necessary is certain to arrive soon.”

“...The enemy isn’t Aureatia, is it?”

“That’s right.”

Hiroto the Paradox had been defeated. His whole camp was encircled, and with all his power sealed away—he was a helpless child.

However, this man would always make you believe *he had something up his sleeve*.

“Zigita Zogi bequeathed to me a *specific piece of speculation*. Now, with the tenth match upcoming, there is bound to be a large upset of the powers here in Aureatia, even more so than with Alus the Star Runner’s attack. I’m not going to have your troops fight to overthrow Aureatia... You’re going to fight to protect it.”

Morio curled up the edge of his lips.

He had joined up with Hiroto the Paradox in order to get the battlefield that he, and all the Okafu mercenaries, wanted.

If Hiroto was going to offer that to them, then Morio welcomed

it with open arms.

“Mr. Morio Ariyama. I drew you in as an ally precisely for a day like this.”

“All right, then. Give me all the details.”

The situation changed on the day of the tenth match.

In the fifth fortress, set in a slightly northwest position from the center of Aureatia, the Twenty-Nine Officials who occupied a leading position in Iriolde's camp were gathered around a war table.

Eighteenth Minister, Quewai the Moon Fragment. An uncanny genius who rose to the Twenty-Nine Officials despite his innately poor interpersonal skills with an intellect that far made up for it.

Former Twelfth Minister, Hidow the Clamp. A young recluse who, due to his highly astute wits, was drawn from Rosclay's camp over to Iriolde's after he willingly gave up his seat on the Aureatia Assembly.

Twenty-Seventh General, Haade the Flashpoint. The final old general who, despite stepping over piles of corpses to survive to his age, still had the fierce fires of war ignited inside him.

Former Fifth Minister, Iriolde the Atypical Tome. The true mastermind who never lost any of his power despite being expelled from the Assembly and who had constructed this large force through his latent influential power.

"First will be Yukis's fungi soldiers. We'll have these things attack the city indiscriminately," Haade said nonchalantly.

The freight cars that the transport squads deployed to all regions of Aureatia were filled with fungi in a dormant state. They were simple organisms, and it was possible to precisely adjust when exactly they would awaken.

"In order to suppress this, we'll deploy our army. Naturally, the reform faction guys don't know this. Once they head out to take care of the fungi, they'll end up clashing with our forces. Turn the scene into a chaotic mess, and it'll be all ours. Moving out according to plan, we launch a one-sided, preemptive strike. For the pretext...just let it get out that the reformation faction attacked us, or accidentally shot at civilians, whatever works. Once the battlefield opens up, there are bound to be some people who *that*

will actually happen to, anyway.”

Tracing the map of Aureatia, Haade continued the summary of the operation.

“Quewai, you’re in charge of contacting Yukis. Creating the script to rouse all the citizens, that’ll be you, Hidow. Though using Iriolde’s connections will probably be enough to get most things through anyway.”

“...What about Rosclay?” Hidow said, looking weary and fed up.

He had been swept along in the course of events until he now found himself in this position, but he still wasn’t satisfied with any of it.

Not with the plan to overthrow Aureatia, nor the fact that he had ended up like this.

“No matter how strong this old fart’s influence may be, Rosclay the Absolute’s a whole different story. If that guy gets up in front of people and says a word or two, any legitimacy we’ve got’s gonna bottom out.”

“Well, that’s why we picked the day of Rosclay’s match. As far as his actions are concerned, we have a means to forestall ’im. I’ve sent Tuturi out to that operation already.”

Twenty-First General, Tuturi the Blue Violet Foam. She had been considerably wounded in the battle during the ninth match, but...even then, there was no way she’d simply be absent from such an important mission.

“...Secretive bastard. If that’s the case, then hurry up and fill us in.”

“Make you feel left out, did I? Poor guy.”

Haade smiled, looking completely unapologetic.

“...Haade.” Iriolde spoke up. “You see, I have no talent for war. Naturally...I’ve entrusted you with all the military decision-making, yes... However, regarding Rosclay... I find it a slight bit strange. Are you sure it’s wise...to not limit it to just Tuturi, and deploy Romzo the Star Map with her...?”

Iriolde was fully informed about the plan to neutralize Rosclay, as if it was only natural.

Hidow clicked his tongue.

Am I the only one who wasn’t informed; is that it?

“Hidow. Tuturi’s heading out to a specific area based on information we got from Romzo the Star Map. Thing is, he’s

another one who used to be in Rosclay's camp, just like you."

"Holding it against me; that it?"

"*Gwaha!* Don't get so upset. Apparently, Rosclay makes periodic contact with someone out in the second borough of the Eastern Outer Ward. No one besides Romzo ever noticed. That's the amount of caution he puts into meeting them, whoever they are."

"I didn't know about that, either... So, Tuturi and Romzo are going to take them hostage, is that it? But the Eastern Outer Ward's second borough? There's no way to tell if they're even alive after Alus the Star Runner laid waste to it."

"Hostage...isn't exactly it. First off, for a guy like Rosclay, taking hostage of someone he's close with ain't gonna work. If they do happen to be there, the best we could do is kill 'em and try to piss him off. Tuturi and I were considering a different possibility."

There was someone whom Rosclay had been secretly making contact with when the beginning of the Sixways Exhibition was close to starting. He was a man who would make any and all preparations necessary in the pursuit of turning a single victory into a certainty.

"There's a chance he's keeping a secret weapon for himself on par with the hero candidates. If that was the case...we gotta use a surprise attack with Romzo to take the initiative and stop 'em from doing anything. As long as we can crush that element of uncertainty, then stopping the man himself from doing anything won't be that hard at all."

"If you say so, I guess."

If this piece coming out into the open would spell defeat for them, it just had to stay hidden.

If this coming out would mean defeat for him, then they would just have to force it out.

Unlike the other hero candidates, Rosclay the Absolute was nothing more than a simple knight.

He couldn't possibly win in a contest against one of Aureatia's military parties, and if they cornered him into a position where he was cut off from his outside assistance, they had a chance of successfully pinning him down. At the end of the day, though, Haade had a longer relationship with Rosclay than Hidow did.

While Hidow had been forced against his will, herein lay part of the reason why he was supporting this power. Haade the Flashpoint, well aware of how fearsome Rosclay the Absolute was,

wouldn't be plotting a rebellion with no chance of victory.

Haade was a warmonger who loved war more than anything else, but while that was true, it was exactly why the man hated being forced into fighting a *losing war* above all. If he continued winning more and more, he would be able to savor the next battle. That was how he put it.

Realistically speaking, their chances of success were plenty high enough—the camp had Haade, who controlled a majority of Aureatia's military, and Iriolde, who still controlled Aureatia behind the scenes. The National Defense Research Institute, and the multiple self-proclaimed demon kings that belonged to it, could produce more than enough constructs to lay waste to the city, and were even researching the weapons of the Beyond that they had requisitioned from Kaete's camp.

"The plan is to not cause any meaningless damages, right?"

"We're not thinking up some blitzkrieg attack to rush the palace and declare victory this time or anything like that. You know what the most important point is when tearing down a country? It ain't winning. It's about how *much more superior* we make ourselves look. We'll exterminate the fungi soldiers before anyone else can and crush the reformation faction who'll harm the citizens in all the chaos. With that, once the military's claimed superiority, we'll fill the heads of the people with the inside details about the Sixways Exhibition, and the true story behind Lucnoca the Winter's demise... Whether it's fear or fervor, it'll get a lot easier to deceive 'em if we give 'em somewhere to direct all that, right?"

The Lucnoca the Winter matter will get the people on our side. If things go well, it'll be totally bloodless. Heck, even Rosclay's camp might want to strike a deal at a reasonable point of compromise themselves...

Rosclay's camp, on the side of the system, was right now facing several problems that they needed to deal with all at once. Political instability that had swelled with the Sixways Exhibition.

The first problem was the Free City of Okafu and the goblin nation—a foreign threat that was scheming to permeate and infiltrate Aureatia by backing Zigita Zogi the Thousandth. Now that Zigita Zogi had fallen and their original plan had broken down, there was the possibility they would use more forceful means in order to secure a position of political superiority.

Having used hero candidacy privileges to slip into Aureatia, if they were to launch a simultaneous insurgent attack, they were sure

to become a difficult enemy that orthodox countermeasures couldn't keep up with.

The second was Obsidian Eyes. Now that the existence of the invisible army had been brought to light by Jelky the Swift Ink's speech, it was possible they had no need to keep their identity a secret anymore.

The third was the Old Kingdoms' loyalists. The independent armed group considered the current Queen Sephite an invader who usurped the throne from Aureatia's previous King Aur, and advocated a return to the Old Kingdom.

With Haade's military rising up in revolt, it's impossible for Aureatia to handle these threats. Either way...the reformation faction can't crush the military faction. What does Rosclay plan on doing?

The train of thought coming to an end, Hidow lifted his head.

"Uneasy, are we, Hidow the Clamp?" Iriolde inquired, as if he had seen into his mind at that moment.

"...Iriolde."

Ever since he had been expelled from the Assembly— No. Even before that, since the era of the Central Kingdom, Iriolde the Atypical Tome had given support and supplied personnel from the shadows to those who suited his own goals. The result was this camp of writhing evil unbound, and the National Defense Research Institute.

The darkness of Aureatia had swelled to far too big a size for anyone to confront.

"This is fine. Just fine. My...my feelings of ambition, revenge, have all long withered away. We won't do any sort of thing...that you would worry about. Neither to Aureatia, nor its people..." Iriolde mildly explained.

He made it sound as though he was truly speaking from the heart, even toward Hidow, who was still harboring doubts.

"...I simply wish to see the stagnation crumble. I want this deadlocked Aureatia to be reinvigorated with young...and new strength. If you all are able to accomplish that...then, why, I couldn't want for anything more."

"Don't patronize me."

Haade's camp, under Iriolde's control. Their objective was ultimately just like the Old Kingdoms' loyalists: the dissolution of the current government. Not only that, but it was also an operational undertaking on a scale that none of the other ragtag

powers at play could compare to.

Destroying the pretext of the Sixways Exhibition, claiming prestige behind slaying Lucnoca, and getting their hands on the seat of power in Aureatia. What would happen from there, Hidow wondered.

Expunge Rosclay the Absolute, the symbol of their opposing faction, and make him out to be the mastermind behind the queen's assassination. Or perhaps, instead, leave the queen unharmed and keep her close by as a puppet.

These guys... We're the fourth problem.

The time to begin the operation was close. The situation was bound to transform into a complex one far exceeding his imagination.

Who would act? Where would the fighting break out?

Not a military officer himself, Hidow didn't truly know about the chaos of war.

He was sure that the only one who had a complete understanding of it was Haade the Flashpoint.

Nevertheless, it was highly likely that the opportunities for everyone to make their moves would overlap.

Who will it be?

It had already been scheduled...since it was the day that Rosclay the Absolute, known to all the people of Aureatia, would have his movements restricted the most.

Which power is going to act?

It was morning.

The day of the second round, match ten.



Eastern Outer Ward, second borough. Along the waterway, a lightly equipped group was spread out in fixed intervals.

Most of them were dressed like civilians. Nevertheless, an experienced eye would likely understand that they were part of a regularly trained and commanded armed force.

They were dispersed in dozens of small squads because they anticipated an immediate deployment.

It wasn't a militarily important position. And yet, if their enemy

had gotten wise to their movements, they couldn't afford to sit back without responding. Twenty-First General Tuturi's squad, by going on ahead to this region, had also been tasked with getting an idea of how Aureatia's army would respond to the military action from Haade's camp.

"...Koff."

Tuturi coughed quietly and folded up her binoculars.

Ever since the battle at the Mali Wastes, her coughing wouldn't stop, as if she had come down with a cold.

The frostbite covering half of her body was wrapped in several layers of bandages.

"There are no signs that the reformation faction's observing the target. Yup, this has gotta be a dud. Koff," she said to the man standing behind her.

"Well. Perhaps to young Rosclay...this person is someone so important, he needs to keep it a secret, even from his men."

Romzo the Star Map, survivor from the First Party. It went without saying that Tuturi didn't trust the man one bit.

Originally, he had acted as the Old Kingdoms' loyalists' adviser, offering support to Gilnes the Ruined Castle. However, he abandoned them for unclear reasons and defected over to Rosclay's camp. It was no exaggeration to say that his actions drove Gilnes the Ruined Castle to his death.

Now he had even double-crossed Rosclay's camp, switching to Iriolde's side. The reasons behind this were equally unclear. The same thing was bound to occur a third, even fourth, time.

Romzo... The joke here isn't that you had some difference in ideals...or that you're an undercover agent for Rosclay, is it?

The First Party. Boasting likely the greatest individual fighting prowess of any minian, and surviving his clash with the True Demon King, Romzo had never seized any glory at all. The champion who had seen the True Demon King in person was a failing shadow of his past self, unable to stop himself from running roughshod over any trust or good reputation anyone gave him.

He was close to peerless when it came to his individual fighting power. However, he couldn't be left behind to guard the operational headquarters either.

There was the possibility that a betrayal of some kind, or a simple flight of Romzo's fancy, would lead him to murder everyone in the leadership. The apprehensions certainly weren't overblown.

Even within Iriolde's camp, where all manner of monsters were tolerated, this man couldn't be.

...I'll do just like Jelky's aiming to do with the Sixways Exhibition. If this guy's a pawn that's guaranteed to betray us, I'll force him to go up against someone just as strong before that happens...and crush him. If possible, right here, right now, before my very eyes.

< General Tuturi. >

There was a report from the radzio strapped to her hip. It was from the soldier keeping watch over the urban area.

< There appears to have been a notification to the various merchants from the Assembly that the tenth match has been postponed. Their reasoning is that Soujirou the Willow-Sword's wounds are too deep, and it would be impossible to hold a consummate match in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen. >

"They went and did it after all, huh? Playing out like they expected this."

< Have they seen through our operation? >

"Oh yeah, of course. Rosclay can easily look at things from our position and figure we're preparing an attack for the day of his match... They pretended the schedule was going to go as planned right up to the day of to prevent us from adjusting the operation at the last minute. Even Rosclay knew from the very start that today was the do-or-die moment."

"...Would that then mean"—Romzo, standing next to her, interrupted with a question—"that he's seen through Haade's movements as well? Haade convened everyone early this morning, didn't he? Setting up a sudden attack at a time when it would be easily found out seems like a mistake to me."

"*Hmph...* Still, there's a meaning behind setting this all up last-minute. It's not that we have to aim for the day of the match to stop Rosclay. But on any other day, it would be impossible to *put a stop to Jelky* until everything else is all over. As long as he had no conclusive evidence that the operation would get started today, he wouldn't have any reason to smooth things over among the merchants and related people... *Koff*, Jelky now needs to use a hundred percent of his business skills to push for postponing the match, and in some cases go to the various involved parties and negotiate directly. Then, once he's in that situation, we make him deal with a combined assault. That's the target...*koff*."

Rosclay's camp, on the side of the system, could no longer

abandon the Sixways Exhibition itself. The resources and sacrifices squandered on this plan were far too great to do that.

"Even tens of thousands of lives are a suitable price," was that it?

Tuturi flashed a flippant smile.

The recon soldier had just plunged into their targeted shack.

Tuturi immediately called through the radzio.

"Well... *Koff*, anyone there?"

< No. No one is here. It's just a storeroom— >

The call was cut off with a crack.

Flames swelled up from the inside of the building. A sound of an explosion.

The light and a roar echoed through the slum, still in the middle of its renovations.

"A trap...!"

Someone had seen through their movements. Even though this was within expectations, for them to get attacked with such precision...

"...Rosclay!"



"General Haade! The tenth match has been postponed! Elpcoza Peddler's Union, Leafshade Snake Guild, Melp Six Moon Accord, Insa Moseo Co., and Rezkard's received the notification from the Aureatia Assembly all at the same time!"

"Really? Going as planned, then."

Haade was reclining far back in his chair as he polished his gun.

He didn't turn around at the messenger who rushed into the command room to give his report.

"If they've done that, it means the enemy's already started deploying squads somewhere. Gather all the communication from each location and investigate any suspicious areas."

"Yessir!"

As he listened to the footsteps of the soldier depart, Haade murmured, "Trained them real well, Iriolde."

"...What's this? Capable personnel don't only gather under the banner of the Aureatia army, you know. I...discreetly picked out such individuals and gave the necessary environment, nothing more. Besides, Haade, this is just as much your accomplishment."

“Oh yeah? What do you mean?”

“They say wars aren’t started by generals, but...it was the presence of a general with as much unifying power and strength as yourself that made it possible to bring all those standing up against the system together. That is something that someone like myself, only able to work in the shadows, simply does not have...”

“Hmm. ‘Wars aren’t started by generals,’ huh?”

The corner of Haade’s mouth raised ever so slightly into a smile.

The gun he was caring for at the moment was an early model, far removed from the pistols that had begun to circulate in recent years, but it had been his partner across many long years of war. The grip he had tightly held from the age of the True Demon King was soaked deep with blood and smoke, and accustomed to his hand, as if adhered fast to his skin.

“Iriolde. Do you have any grandchildren?”

“...No. I was never very suited to starting a family... In certain respects, my compatriots are like my children. I grow jealous of you all from time to time.”

“That so? Well, I’m still gonna keep going anyway. Know you won’t mind. Lately, my grandchild, he’s learned how to stand and walk, see...and now he picks pick up all sorts of stuff to play with, so my son and his wife have started grumbling about how much of a handful he is! *Kwah-hah-hah-hah!*”

Haade the Flashpoint had previously withdrawn from his seat among Aureatia’s Twenty-Nine Officials.

His seat as Twenty-Seventh General was so high because he had come back to service after retiring once before.

Even after distinguishing himself on the battlefield and obtaining a peaceful life where he wouldn’t need to expose himself to danger—even after the era of the True Demon King—he still wanted to throw himself into the flashpoint of strife more than he could stand.

“So, well, this happened just the other day... My grandchild, he was playing with a wood-carved gun. You know the ones, Iriolde. Some shop carves ’em out for little kids, those ones. When that happened, let me tell you...it really hit me hard. Made me realize that I’m hopelessly in love with war.”

Right then, an explosion echoed from right outside the building.

Hidow was the first to jump back, moving away from the

windows and getting down on the ground.

“...An enemy attack?!”

“Don’t piss yourself, Hidow,” Haade replied, remaining calm. “...I don’t think Rosclay’s guys sniffed this place out, but best to be sure. Iriolde, have someone go check on the situation. Hopefully, it’s just a little accident.”

Iriolde coolly laughed.

“*Kweh, heh*. My oh my... I don’t really think after getting this far that you’d be outwitted like that. Looks like everything doesn’t always go according to plan, does it, Haade?”

“That’s how it is on the battlefield. Not often that everything conveniently goes your way.”

Iriolde raised a fingertip and slowly gave his orders. Two from his four-person elven bodyguard team left the room without making a sound.

“An explosive means Kaete might be behind this, Haade.”

“You mean like that cheap trick he played during the sixth match...? Eh, trust me, no need to worry. Just calm down, Hidow.”

“...C’mon. We really gonna be okay?”

“Gotta finish what I was saying. Iriolde.”

Brushing Hidow’s apprehensions aside, Haade cracked his neck.

“Watching my grandkid play... See, that’s when it came to me. I...love war so much, hard to believe it myself. I bet there isn’t anyone who loves watching minia dying or getting killed than me... Ah well, except maybe for Soujirou.”

“Oh, but of course I know that. A man like Rosclay can never understand such a breakdown. That man is far too respectable... I allow it. You are free to fight however you wish. Demon kings, heroes...are all too trivial compared to the deeds people engage in.”

“*Heh-heh-heh*... That’s not what I’m trying to talk about here.”

Haade was unable to hold back his laughter.

It sounded as if his curiosity and anticipation endlessly welled up and came spilling out.

“My grandkid... When I saw him playing with that toy gun, see, I felt genuinely *jealous* of him. Seriously envious of such a...*kawaka*, such a tiny, innocent kid. Listen. What do you think? After this, even after I grow senile and keel over...that little kid’s *gonna be able to go to war himself*! Enjoy something this damn fun!”

Taking in Haade’s monologue with a peaceful smile, Iriolde finally stopped saying anything.

Standing up from his seat, Quewai the Moon Fragment ardently backed away.

Hidow opened his mouth and gazed at Haade's fierce visage.

"So, I thought to myself."

Iriolde's elf bodyguard was the first to act.

Faster than she could unsheathe her thrusting sword, her skull was split open by a bullet.

Hidow heard the gunshot.

"War *belongs to me!* I'm going make sure something fun ends here with me!"

Who had shot her?

There was only one person sitting at the table, holding a gun in their hands and capable of sending out quick-drawn shots to best Iriolde's bodyguard.

"...Haade!"

For the first time, Iriolde grew enraged.

It may have been the first time in his life the man had raised his voice.

Faster than his angered words could continue, a bullet pierced his throat.

"*Gwaugh, nnngh, glrg, ah.*"

Gunshot. Gunshot. Gunshot. Gunshot.

The rain of bullets nailed the remaining bodyguard together with Iriolde to the seat, never even giving them a moment to stand. Amidst the storm, brains and blood burst everywhere.

The mastermind who controlled the dark side of Aureatia turned into a mass of flesh mixed up with the chair, and perished.

"*Keh, heh-heh.*"

Haade laughed, showered with gruesome blood splatter.

When he dropped the emptied guns from both his hands, the guns fell to the floor with a sticky splat.

It was fun. That was why he was laughing.

"*Kwa-ha, hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah!*"

Gunshot.

He shot the soldier guarding the entrance to the room from behind his back with a newly drawn gun.

The inside of his long overcoat was fully loaded with the latest models of small firearms.

All of them loaded with live rounds. From the very start.

Two soldiers went to draw their swords, but a slash from a

different direction cut them down. An attack from a soldier directly under Haade's command. Cut down, and before they could even collapse, their skulls were then shot through with a bullet.

"*Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha...*!"

Gunshot. Gunshot. Gunshot. Gunshot.

His coat fluttered from the wind pressure of the gunpowder.

Calmly walking atop the long war table, deranged Haade seemed to make his bullet fire come out like a song.

Left. Right in front. Below. Left. Right.

Catching his targets using only his peripheral vision, he continued shooting down Iriolde's soldiers with terrifying speed.

Violence, hatred, death, all of it scattered, spread out, and filled the room.

Hidow was terrified.

"Wh-what...what are you doing, Haade?!"

"Ahh...*kwah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah!* War...nothing can compare!"

"Haade..."

Hidow gulped mid-sentence.

Behind Haade, he saw Quewai with his face down on the war table.

He wasn't asleep. The blood from the bottom of his head spread out endlessly and ran down the table.

Haade had automatically and casually killed Quewai, who had moved to attack at a moment's judgment.

On top of the war table, the devilish walk clicked with the sound of his boots.

There were six survivors: Hidow, and the few soldiers directly under Haade's command.

All the rest were dead.

"Since when...?" Hidow mumbled. He had discerned what was going on.

Now...the person he was truly terrified of wasn't Haade the Flashpoint exposing his nightmarish insanity. This event didn't just happen now, but had *been* happening far, far before this moment.



The person Haade had joined forces with was the true terror.

No one at all had realized it. *Such an idea* never even crossed his mind.

When Haade was finished walking to the end of the table, he sat down on the edge.

Turning around, Hidow shouted. “*Since when?! Haade!*”

Haade had produced a small radzio from his breast pocket. Haade reported in.

It was a low, merciless voice, as if to completely chill the heat from the bullet fire.

“I couldn’t wait for this...Rosclay. Cerebrum to brain stem.”

Any and all rebellion was meaningless.

The Sixways Exhibition to determine a single victor.

However, if there was one person there who was able to determine the inevitability of victory from the very start...

“Terminus excision is complete.”



The information detailing the annihilation of the command center for Iriolde’s camp reached the Aureatia’s Central Assembly Hall far after the fact.

Receiving the report was the man maintaining a position of neutrality and in charge of administrative affairs, First Minister Grasse the Base Map, along with Eighth Minister Sheanek the Word Intermediary. They were hard-pressed handling the sudden cancellation of the tenth match and had no reason to be aware of the outbreak of even further strife.

The minute he heard the news, Grasse spread out any documents he could get his hands on, and Sheanek immediately picked the decisive set of meeting minutes from them.

“Okay, let me just ask to be sure, Sheanek...did you realize it?”

“...Of course not. Even you hadn’t imagined it, did you, Minister Grasse?”

“Rosclay and Haade...were working together from the very start while they participated in the Sixways Exhibition... This’ll turn

everything on its head.”

Grasse recalled the debate he had with Sheanek before about the settled tournament matchups.

Despite wielding the authority to sculpt the layout to ensure that he would win, Rosclay the Absolute had failed to construct it properly—even the two of them, with their bird’s eye looking over the matches, believed as such.

Sheanek hurriedly looked over the tournament bracket.

“This would then mean that in order for Rosclay to win the tournament, if anything, he needed to make it look like the bracket would make it impossible. Otherwise, with one person clearly set to be the winner, the remaining fifteen would all be on guard against him... Before the opening of the tournament, all of them would have tried to dispose of their greatest threat while still in peak condition. And in fact, Cayon... Kaete, Enu, everyone prioritized scheming against the opponent at hand! Despite the fact that by actually fighting by any means necessary...Rosclay would come out the winner!”

“...No. There were some trying to defeat Rosclay from the start, weren’t there? But...if someone intended to defy Rosclay...the one who would realistically try to do that was Haade...so they’d side with his camp...! Made sure to cut down that possibility right before the damn thing kicked off...”

Those rebelling against a mighty power were exactly the ones to seek out an equally mighty, different power.

Rosclay’s scheme, to back Haade *as his own antagonistic force*, had been a fatal trap, holding the very psychology of such rebels in the palm of his hand.

Aureatia’s military leader had even managed to drag out Iriolde the Atypical Tome, who had escaped Aureatia’s clutches and continued to scheme behind the scenes. He threw absolutely everything he had built up through his conspiring on a feigned chance of victory conveniently prepared for him.

“With this...when looking at the tournament bracket with this in mind, how does it end up?”

“...His first-round opponent was Jivlart the Ash Border. Nothing changes there. After all, if Rosclay chose someone he definitely couldn’t beat from round one, some would’ve started to think something was fishy.”

“Although he was actually forced into a much more difficult

battle than he expected. Kia the World Word was simply an anomaly—yes?”

“C’mon, there isn’t anybody out there that could’ve imagined a monster like that. Not even Rosclay.”

Despite being exposed to an unimaginable and terrible threat in the first round, he had won.

From there was the third match, which would determine who would serve as his second-round opponent.

“Ozonezma the Capricious versus Soujirou the Willow-Sword...”

“Ah right, I remember. Right in the middle of the match...there was a rumor that Haade contacted Dant, wasn’t there? That if Soujirou was to lose, he’d join Ozonezma’s side... At least, that was what I thought it was about. But thinking about that now...”

Haade had deployed troop strength so grand in scale he didn’t care how it may have looked against Ozonezma the Capricious, to sabotage his arrival at the arena. As if he hadn’t taken any consideration whatsoever to Rosclay coming in from the sidelines to intervene.

It had been a clearly abnormal fixation on gaining victory over a nameless and unidentified hero candidate. Yet no one had suspected a thing.

“The second round. This fight in the second round was what they were after. Haade... Even if Ozonezma had been victorious, he planned on interfering with Ozonezma from within... Isn’t that right?! From the very start, he didn’t have any intention of making his own candidate win at all! Just like Rosclay... Haade only needed to be on the side of the winner in the first round by any means necessary!”

“In other words...no matter who claimed victory in the third match, Rosclay’s opponent couldn’t win in the second round... If Haade...and Aureatia’s largest military faction were to use the full extent of their power as sponsors to obstruct their candidates...then, yeah, there’s no way they’d win!”

Much more, the candidate Haade backed was Soujirou, who lacked any knack for intrigue and had no political patron to back him up. If anything, Haade had made sure Soujirou was just such a man, and then nominated him.

As a candidate he could force to lose in the second round against Rosclay.

“How exactly did you intend to fight in the semifinals?”

This question that Hiroto the Paradox had previously thrown Haade's way had been, for him, an inconvenient one.

From the very beginning, *he never had any intention of fighting in the third round.*

"...The third round. For this one..."

"Well... For that, the answers have already been abundantly clear by now. Rosclay never had any intention of fighting in it at all! Common sense dictated that either Alus or Lucnoca was guaranteed to advance to the third round! Just like what happened after the eighth match—they intended to designate them self-proclaimed demon kings and eliminate them before the match! Victories up until the third round, then this would be the only win by default... No one would find it suspicious at all. Since Alus, Lucnoca...the dragonkin are threats to the minian races...!"

"...Even assuming so," Sheanek murmured.

Following back through Rosclay's scheme like this made it clear.

Threads of intrigue had been woven into the gathering of the strongest shura across the horizon. Kia the World Word. Lucnoca the Winter. There were several elements that could destroy Rosclay's plan.

In the longer term, the more elaborate a plan became, the more that overthrowing a single presumption would necessitate revising it all.

"This means that...everything was revised. Not only that, but in regard to the Lucnoca matter, he managed to turn it into an objective that incited Iriolde's camp to whittle away at their fighting force. Qwell the Wax Flower's disappearance is also all too convenient for Rosclay as well. Above all, though...up until he reached this stage, where nothing can be overturned...he successfully kept his true strength hidden from the eyes of forces who proved the biggest conspiratorial threat—the Free City of Okafu and the invisible army..."

"To pull off such a feat...Rosclay...!"

He looked. No matter how many times he did, the facts of the tournament bracket didn't change.

It had already been decided, from the moment the Sixways Exhibition had begun.

He confirmed the bracket Rosclay belonged to.

Psianop the Inexhaustible Stagnation. Dropped from the tournament due to the death of his sponsor.

Toroa the Awful. Dropped out after his defeat in the first match.

Alus the Star Runner. Dropped from the tournament after his defeat in the second round and his self-proclaimed demon king designation.

Lucnoca the Winter. Dropped from the tournament due to a large-scale military operation and her defeat in the ninth match.

Ozonezma the Capricious. Dropped out after his defeat in the third match.

Kia the World Word. Dropped out after her defeat in the fourth match.

Soujirou the Willow-Sword. Dropout assured by the defection of his sponsor.

“All of them wiped out!”

Rosclay the Absolute would win through to the finals.

Looking back now, they understood that all of it had been part of the operation to make him continue forward.

Haade’s machinations, appearing to guide Soujirou to victory, in truth had been a maneuver to pair him up against Rosclay and make sure Rosclay advanced forward. A tournament bracket, all for this purpose.

However, those who didn’t know were assuredly unable to realize it.

“F-from the very beginning...”

Whatever actions anyone took, or whatever wiles they used to claim victory, absolutely everything had been devised on an even higher level.

The Sixways Exhibition. A true battle in order to determine the sole Hero.

“This group...never included a single person *who could win against Rosclay!*”

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Ishura*. It's Keiso. The commendable readers who have followed this series from its first publication may perhaps remember the advertisement page at the end of the first volume. At long last, *Ishura*, Vol. 7, came out during the winter.

The content of this volume also concerned Lucnoca the Winter, though I didn't necessarily do it to match up with the publication schedule. The volume was filled with enough people dying and all-out war to give the previous one a run for its money. In contrast to all that, however, I have been able to continue writing this series all the way to the second round of the Sixways Exhibition thanks to Kureta, providing wonderful illustrations every time and perfectly handling the designs of the large cast of characters; my editor Satou, who always humors a worthless human like me and carefully manages my progress; all of the individuals involved in the publication and promotion; as well as all the help and support from all of the readers. Thank you all, truly. Every time I write the afterword, I meditate on my gratitude.

With this gratitude, as well as a reflection back to the start of it all, I have a delicious pesto recipe that I would like to share with you.

As for what prompted this reflection, it is because I will be using the hard cheese that I used in the first volume's afterword, Parmigiano-Reggiano, here once again. It is a very convenient ingredient that keeps well and can be used in various situations, so I would once again recommend always having some on hand. However, for this recipe, there is one other very expensive item you will need to have on hand: a blender.

I myself went quite a long time without owning a blender, simply using a dubious hand blender I bought off the internet when I truly needed one, but a proper blender is much easier to use and stands out from other options in terms of both durability and

easiness to clean. You can find ones that will more than suit your needs in the hundred-dollar range, so I recommend getting one. If you really don't have any other option, please use a mortar and pestle, or similar.

For this recipe, place thirty grams of the cheese in your blender, followed by two tablespoons of olive oil. Fresh basil leaves are very fragrant, so you actually don't need to use that many. I've never properly measured how much before, but I think if you take two to three leaves, wash them, and add them to the blender, that should be enough. Next, add in a handful of the mixed nuts from the bags you can buy at the supermarket. Now, this is simply my opinion on the matter, but for pesto, the flavors of nuts and cheese are the most important. Normal recipes often call for pine nuts and other items that I still don't quite know where to get my hands on, but mixed nuts can generally be found anywhere at cheap prices, and will do wonders for the final flavor, so this is my suggested spin on the recipe.

The only equipment we've used up until now are a tablespoon measure and a mixer, but once you coarsely grind up the above ingredients somewhat and mix them with your pasta, it's complete. The pesto from this recipe makes for a perfect winter pasta dish, fully letting you savor the flavors of the mixed nuts and cheese.

As for why I started bringing up the first volume of the series so much, it's because very recently, I've had the chance to go back and read the first volume many, many times. *Ishura* is getting an anime adaptation. It's an anime all sorts of people, including myself, have spent an incredible amount of energy to make. I'm convinced that the end result will be a truly wonderful work. Once again, I give my deepest gratitude to all the people involved and to all of you, the readers.

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